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## The Relationship between Musical Language and Sound Dramaturgy in the Late Works of Alexander Scriabin: Dissociation versus Determination

**Keywords:** pitch-class set theory, modes, harmony, dramaturgy of form

Alexander Scriabin's creative process, as inscribed in the sound and form of the works he composed after 1910 (beginning with the Piano Sonata No. 6, Op. 62), reveals an authentically powerful and original imaginative nature; the vision of his compositional solutions contributes to the first avant-garde of the 20th century. The addition of Scriabin's work to the immense wave of novelties in the first two decades of the past century is owed to the American musicology of the early 1970s, which, by means of the set theory analysis, integrated works belonging to the Russian composer into the category of atonal works, together with the most resounding names of the European avant-garde: Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók a.o. (see Forte 1973).

An analysis of the relationships between the acoustic language and the temporal form in the works of the time is burdened by the coexistence and frequent overlapping of pitch systems – extended tonality, modalism, and atonality – pertaining to the energetic and speedy emergence of revolutionary concepts. A synchronization and/or fast succession of artistic styles and visions – post-romanticism, impressionism, expressionism, neo-classicism, experimentalism –, together with the formal emancipation of the coordinates of musical language<sup>1</sup> makes us conceive of several types of relationships

<sup>1</sup> “In the first two decades, a parallel or simultaneous emancipation of every musical-language coordinate is taking place, leading to a transgression of structural

between language and form, based on the functional determinism of systems. Thus, beside the role of tonal functionality in the articulation of architecture in post-romantic works, we can demonstrate intervallic functionality in modal and atonal compositions (Debussy and Schoenberg) and the functionality of complex sounds (color) in the same category of works, with more refined visions (Debussy, Webern). In scores in which the laws of musical determinism are combined, traditional forms are treated as architectural building patterns of the work in the new language (Ravel, Berg, Bartók); (Vasiliu 2002: 23-124).

Where is Scriabin situated? In a study we have published in 2002, a first example refers to the modal structure of the pitch organization (the tone-semitone mode in Piano Sonata No. 6), deduced from the make-up and succession of chords (Vasiliu 2002: 49). Rightly do we ask ourselves the question now whether the time progression of the pitch structure observed early in the work applies the laws of formal articulation in modalism: transposition, complementarity, proportionality (symmetry), projecting the modal (intervallic) structure onto the tonal plane of the work (Vasiliu 2002: 49-61). The architectures resulted from these techniques are inscribed in the category of non-developing forms created through juxtaposition, alternation and variation. How do we interpret, however, the articulation of sonata forms in Scriabin's piano sonatas? If explaining his pitch organization has represented a renewed challenge for international musicology, materialized in multiple analytic and monographic studies from the beginning of the 1970s to the present day, the influence of his harmonic thinking on the temporal modeling of form is still at the outset. We shall see why.

## REFERENCES IN THE HISTORY OF ANALYZING SCRIABIN'S HARMONIC LANGUAGE

An explanation for the mysterious sound combinations in Scriabin's post-tonal works was developed in Russian and American musicology. Even if Russian musicians' hypotheses formulated during his lifetime and over the following decades take precedence from a temporal point of view, their lack

and expressive limits. Melody becomes an integrative cyclical concept and vertically-extended hyper-thematicism, rhythm is constituted as an organizing principle for the other sound features, gradually installing the supremacy of pulse, harmony becomes a creator of color and temporal form, polyphony evolves both towards linearity and textures of global effect, timbre comes to the fore by becoming *Klangfarbenmelodie*, traditional forms are detached from the ensemble of language and mentality which had generated them and become means of generalized expression. It is an era of excess and experiments, which will inspire all directions of musical evolution up to the present day." (Vasiliu 2002: 221).

of circulation or translation meant that the understanding of Scriabin was influenced mostly by the studies of American researchers.

### **The pitch-class set theory**

Created by Allen Forte – based on mathematical analysis applied to dodecaphonic music by composer Milton Babbitt in the 1960s (see Babbitt 1960, 1961) – the pitch-class set theory introduces algebraic formalization in investigating the pitch structure coherence of the work. By representing the sound unit as a series of integers (*pitch-class set*) and defining the relations between sets through specific derivations – complementation, inclusion, transposition, inversion, union, intersection – Forte explains the stages of proving the unitary concept in the atonal composition, its constitution as a *complex set*. Albeit merely analyzing fragments of Scriabin's scores,<sup>2</sup> Forte is credited with having laid the basis for a unitary investigation of the pitch universe, by uniting melody and harmony through a formalized method which evidenced both musical scales as set of numbers, as well as their intervallic structure as a vector of creation. The rigors of this theory (condensing sound space and reducing temporal parameters) – by creating a neutral approach from an aesthetic, semantic and stylistic point of view – would generate creative applications situated in the vicinity of the analytical objectives mentioned.

At this point, we have to mention the Romanian version of the pitch-class set theory achieved by Anatol Vieru in *Cartea modurilor* (Vieru 1980), a work elaborated in the period following the American research. The study achieves a giant leap forward in researching the creative potential of sequences, as deduced from the same operations of the set theory and, additionally, from the intervallic structure of sound sets. Itself the terminological difference between sets, pitch collections (with Forte) and modes implying sound nuance, ethos, tradition (with Vieru), reflects the involvement of the latter in stylistic aspects of post-tonal composition. In this sense, the analysis of Scriabin's piece *Guirlandes*, Op. 73 emphasizes the structuring of pitch parameters onto the three transpositions of the tone-semitone<sup>3</sup> mode, which the Americans called octatonic.

<sup>2</sup> The last 12 measures of Sonata No. 6 (the succession of pitch structures related on the basis of intersection and inclusion, with a role in preparing the sound of the final "mystical" chord, symbolized in his system through 6-Z49; the first and last measures in Sonata No. 7 (creating sound based on minimal variation in the structure of hexachord 6-Z49); the first seven measures in Sonata No. 9 (the relations between the sound structures individualized by the smallest temporal units and the complex-set structure of the fragment, whereby the analysis also discovered "two unattached sets"); see Forte 1973: 55-57, 58-59, 110-112.

<sup>3</sup> Which Vieru also noted as sequence of numbers (Vieru 1980: 30).

### Reference scales/modes in Scriabin's pitch system

In the 1980s, research on the harmony of Alexander Scriabin was capitalizing on the technique of pitch-class set analysis in order to discover preferential pitch structures, thereby also studying their functioning mode: generating intervallic, chord structures, etc.<sup>4</sup> Most researchers reach the conclusion that Scriabin's post-tonal work is dominated by two modal structures, the acoustic and the octatonic modes (Perle 1984, Antokoletz 1984: 10-12). The first mode was accepted as the origin of the "mystical chord", which defined the works after the symphonic poem *Prometheus*, Op. 60. The octatonic mode was referenced in the tradition of the Russian school (Rimsky-Korsakov) and was widely accepted at the beginning of the century (Debussy, Stravinsky, Bartók), given the balance it creates between diatonic and chromatic, major and minor, given its constitutive symmetry. Highly interesting are the analyses that do not stop at observing the presence of these structures in Scriabin's harmonic and melodic writing but manifest operational thinking, explaining the evolution of discourse by deriving modes, finally accepting the natural character of foreign (non-harmonic) notes. Two different opinions were registered here as well: 1. a method for analysis in serial music, and 2. a start in the analysis of modal-chromatic music. Representing the first direction, George Perle finely and methodically observes a transformation in time through transpositions, intersections, infiltrating foreign notes in the basic pitch structure (octatonic scale) conceived as a series, concluding that Scriabin's system would have come nearer to serial rigor, had he lived and composed after 1915.

The messianic obsessions of Scriabin's last years have tended to raise some question as to what he might still have accomplished. It might have been a great deal, in spite of his quirks and delusions. It seems likely that significant steps in the evolution of an autonomous and coherent twelve-tone tonal system were long delayed because of his early death (Perle 1984:121).

On the other hand, Jay Reise considers Scriabin to have a *flexible compositional method*, treating scales as sound units colored by foreign notes, modeled after the principles of chromatic harmony:

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the pitch-set theory was furthered by the interval cycles theory initiated by George Perle in Perle 1978.

Unlike Debussy (cf. “Voiles”) and Messiaen (cf. “Regard du Père” from *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*), who only exceptionally use pitches outside of the symmetrical scale of a given octatonic or whole-tone passage, Scriabin employs a subtle but traditionally treated principle of “chromaticism” within the whole-tone and octatonic contexts. Notes foreign to the scale are introduced as chromatic elements, which are then resolved back into the given scale by half-step (Reise 1983: 226).

Thus, Jay Reise considers that Scriabin’s compositional method cannot be described through serial technique but through modal chromaticism. These are signs that Russian and European musicological literature had permeated the attention of American analysts.

### **From gravitational harmony to timbre-harmony**

The first stage of explaining Scriabin’s post-tonal compositional method was articulated by Russian musicians who had witnessed his creative process during the last years of his life: Leonid Sabaneyev (1916, 1925) and Boris de Schloezer (1923). Sabaneyev awards special attention to the evolution of Scriabin’s harmony, preceding the assertion of the chord of fourths, explaining the new sound overlapping as alterations of the dominant chord with a seventh and a ninth (Lobanova 2013: 97). At the same time, Sabaneyev is the first to claim that the “*Prometheus* chord” must be interpreted as consonant harmony not requiring a resolution, with the surprising juxtaposition described in a visionary manner as *an extension of the consonance by adding new sounds to the harmonic series* (Lobanova 2013: 103, quoting Sabaneyev, “Scriabin’s *Prometheus*”, in *Almanach Der Blaue Reiter*, 1912). Arguments come by researching the sketch book for the poem *Prometheus*, in which the composer underlined harmonics 7 and 11 (B $\flat$  and F $\sharp$ ). Developed by Varvara Dernova (1968), Sabaneyev’s explanation of Scriabin’s harmony as *a gravitational structure* would be assimilated as a method to synthesize the gravitational and the geometric principles.<sup>5</sup> In his study on Scriabin, Adrian Rațiu emphasizes the continuous changes in harmonic make-ups, which occurred in each work that the composer wrote in the last five years of his life. By revealing both the idiomatic harmonic structures – the “*Prometheus* chord”, the “major-minor

<sup>5</sup> “Barbara Dernova was the first to realize that Scriabin’s late music featured largely, indeed at times entirely, two dominant-sounding harmonies whose roots lay a tritone apart. She named the relationship between these two chords the tritone link” (Ewell 2002: 50).

chord” (in Sonata No. 7) and the modal dynamics involved – Adrian Rațiu concludes: “Aussi loin qu’il soit allé sous certains aspects, Scriabine s’est toujours maintenu dans les limites des principes fondamentaux du système tonal” that occurred in every work written in the past five years (Rațiu 1973, 2: 48). This is how the conception of Scriabin’s harmony is profiled as a gravitational structure.

An equally innovative idea upheld by Sabaneyev is surpassing equal temperament and ascending to ultra-chromaticism, as an effect of capitalizing on harmonics. Reproduced by Sabaneyev, some of the composer’s claims evince Scriabin as an adept of non-tempered music, thereby anticipating the coming synthesis between harmony and timbre.<sup>6</sup> In consonance with the spirituality of the era, Sabaneyev considers Scriabin’s final work to be a “gaze inside an ultra-chromatic abyss”, by relating ultra-chromaticism with theosophy (Vasilu 2002: 108).

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUSICAL LANGUAGE AND THE DRAMATURGY OF FORM**

As opposed to the sophisticated character of his pitch system, the (temporal) form is characterized by clarity, symmetry, traditional processes of motif variation and musical rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> Involving a rigorously mastered polyphonic technique (heterogeneous romantic polyphony), the dense, novel writing (for piano) can naturally be a challenge for the analyst, especially when associated to pitch structure complexity. On the other hand, the obsessive character of the music conveyed through the repetition/variation/development of a limited number of thematic units (motifs) leaves the impression of a dramaturgy found at the border between “developing dynamic forms” and “streamlined static forms” (*Entwicklungsformen* and *Reihungsformen* in Helmut Degen’s terminology, Degen 1957: 333). Although the pitch language is detached from the capacity of the impulse of tonal dramaturgy, Scriabin does not act as Debussy by juxtaposing expositive sections, but rather creates a dramaturgy comparable to the tonal, with the closed circle of pitch variation as counter-balanced by the richness of every other compositional parameter, producing accumulations, gradations and development.

<sup>6</sup> Scriabin’s vision and some of his means are synchronous with those belonging to top composers of the era, Debussy (color variation through harmony) and Schoenberg (*Klangfarbenmelodie* in *Farben* – Five Orchestral Pieces, Op. 16), see Vasilu 2002: 88-101.

<sup>7</sup> “He had a very personal understanding of time and a unique gift to perceive compositional proportion” (Lobanova 2013: 111).

By going over the works he composed after 1910, we perceive a coagulation of the relationship between the pitch system and the process of thematic evolution. That is why we shall stop at early and late works belonging to different genres and forms: Sonata No. 6, Op. 62 and Five Preludes, Op. 74. As we shall see, the works also represent two stages of the temporal form being determined by the pitch structure.

### **(Partial) dissociation between pitch structure and temporal form**

Piano Sonata No. 6, Op. 62 is an example of dissociation between the structuring and discourse processes or between the deep structure and the surface structure (in the terminology of Chomsky's semiotics). Thus, even if the pitch unity of the work is conveyed through the octatonic mode with the three transpositions, the dramaturgy of the sonata form is created by reediting rhetorical means of the classical-romantic era. In fact, sonorous contrast does not originate with the harmonic structure but with the writing as a whole, involving all compositional parameters – melody, harmony, polyphony, timbre, dynamics – and a wide range of expression indications (*sui generis* verbalizations of the conveyed and intended psychological states).

The make-up of the first articulation, interpreted as a main theme because of its expositive character, underlined by the double display with minor changes, is the first paradoxical relationship between the pitch system and the themes (Ex. 1).

The two stages of configuring the idea, the static/ecstatic moment in the beginning, harmonic in nature (A, *mystérieux, concentré*) and the lyrical tune drawing an arched chromatic itinerary (B, m. 11, *avec une chaleur contenue*) are referenced by a single form of the octatonic mode. The chromatic elements for the passage also create a sensitive pitch differentiation.

The bridge (mm. 31-38) can be recognized through two common discourse techniques: restating the main theme (moment B) in transposition at the second form of the mode (which imitates the modulation in the classical bridge) and the suspension in the last three measures, achieved by repeating the same harmonic structure, with a subtle gradation in preparing the statement of a new idea. The mobility of the transitory segment is perceived first of all through the general sound and movement, while only an analysis *hors du temps* can discover the intention of pitch thinking: transposition at  $O_2$  followed by return to  $O_1$  (m. 35) in an impure form, anticipating the pitches of the second theme.

We perceive the new idea, which is expressed beginning with m. 39 (C), as a secondary sonata theme, due to the exhibiting rules – a double presentation,



**A** *Modéré*  
*mystérieux, concentré* *étrange, aigé*

**B** *avec une chaleur contenue*

*cresc. poco*

**A** *concentré*

**Ex. 1.** Scriabin, Sonata No. 6, Op. 62, mm. 1-15.

The encircled notes are foreign in the system and treated as chromatic notes.

**O<sub>1</sub>**

**O<sub>2</sub>**

**O<sub>3</sub>**

**Fig. 1.** Octatonic scale, three transpositions.

Since the fundamental of the starting chord is D, we have built the scales of the three transpositions of the tone-semitone mode on D, Eb, E.



**Ex. 2.** Sonata No. 6, mm. 36-38.

this time as well – and the general musical differentiations: rarefied writing, reduced to monody in some sections, with harmonic resonance to end the phrase – *le rêve prend forme (clarté, douceur, pureté)* – associated to an augmented rhythm. At this point in the commentary, we underline the melodic relatedness with the final cell from B (x). However, at a strictly modal level, the composer prefers continuity, with the first four measures of the theme accurately framed in the same first form of the octatonic mode. However, the end of the first period manifests contamination with form  $O_3$  (44-46), anticipating the transposition of the theme upwards by a major second. This is how we perceive increased mobility in the dramaturgy of the secondary theme.



**Ex. 3.** Sonata No. 6, mm. 39-47.

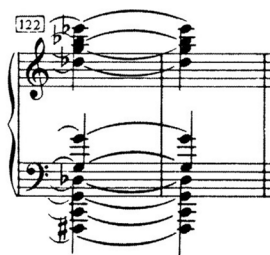
The ending of articulation C draws attention to the technique of closing through successive repetition of the motif, a technique which replaces the cadence (or more precisely the tonal semi-cadence). From a dramaturgical point of view, the dissolving, dissipating effect enables the perception of the

virtuoso ornamental development, beginning at m. 82 as a new theme (Wise 1987: 166, Cheong 1996: 209, de Médicis 2009). A closer look reveals a processing technique of the first cell in theme C – rhythmic variation and motif development. We shall call it  $C_{v1}$ , a variation in character also emphasized by the meter changing in 3/8: *avec entraînement*.

**Ex. 4.** Sonata No. 6, mm. 78-83. The notes framed in the square signify the transpositions by structuring intervals.

The pitch structure is kept ( $O_3$ ) and also capitalized on by its placement in time, as the motif is sequenced by an augmented fourth, while the transposition of the phrase is made by a minor third: structuring intervals in the octatonic mode.  $C_{v1}$  will be followed by another couple of stages of variation treatment –  $C_{v2}$ ,  $C_{v3}$  (mm. 92, 102) – conceived in the same mode ( $O_3$ ), in the manner of classical ornamental variations which keep tonality. The end of the exposition is marked by an impressive synthesis chord, with six of the  $O_3$  notes placed in fourths and fifths, resulting in a juxtaposition which can be associated with the mystical chord (Ex. 5).

The development begins canonically by a restatement of theme A (m. 124), *without changing the transposition of the mode*, kept for a further 40 measures. The ways of thematic treatment edify the dramaturgy: fast, contrasting associations between the motifs of themes A, C,  $C_{v1}$  are made in the first segment, while the second (m. 158) processes idea C, with the last section as a veritable culmination (m. 180 – *joyeux, triomphant*), exhibiting an amplified version of theme B. It is also the moment of changing the modal form into  $O_2$ .



**Ex. 5.** *Sonata No. 6, mm. 122-123.*

This transposition of the scale is kept in the reprise (which brings the thematic material of A, B, C moved downwards by a major second within the same scale). Contrasting the pitch structure continuity, the dramaturgy offers surprising variations in writing and sound, with one of the chosen moments as the restatement of theme C: an example of late romantic rich instrumental plurivocality.

**C**  
 244 *tout devient charme et douceur*

**Ex. 6.** *Sonata No. 6, mm. 244-245.*

The return to the first transposition of the mode ( $O_1$ ) appears at the end of the sonata form, beginning with another display of the variations of theme C (m. 268), with the pitch structure remaining unchanged in the coda, as well, for 118 measures.

This is how the dramaturgy of the form in Sonata No. 6 is created by the rhythms of the melody, the ways of accompaniment, the plurivocal densities, and the ornamental, timbral, dynamic aspects – reflecting an outstanding imagination –, by the capacity to organize in time and by the sense of proportion, by the craft to apply traditional manners of musical rhetoric, and

less by the pitch structure. The three transpositions of the octatonic mode are changed at large distances for the necessary sound refreshment offered by complementarity. We note, however, the capitalization on the intervallic structure of the mode in handling the motif. This technique will be fundamental in the formal modeling of miniature genres.

### Functional determination in the relationship between pitch structure and formal structure

The statement above is a hypothesis formulated after having analyzed Alexander Scriabin's last work, Preludes Op. 74, five miniatures joined through the traditional tempo contrast but an equal number of obsessive states, moments of ecstasy leaving the impression of a compositional trance, of a happening *avant la lettre*.

Despite this impression of inner freedom, the compositional means are perfectly coordinated; the moments of meditation are expressed musically

The musical score for Scriabin's Five Preludes Op. 74, No. 3, mm. 1-14, is presented in four systems. The first system (mm. 1-4) is marked 'Allegro drammatico' and includes dynamics 'p' and 'cresc.' with articulation 'y'. The second system (mm. 5-8) includes 'f comme un cri', 'p subito', and 'cresc.'. The third system (mm. 9-11) includes 'dim.'. The fourth system (mm. 12-14) includes 'cresc.'. The score uses various musical notations including slurs, ties, and fingerings to represent the octatonic mode and its transpositions.

**Ex. 7.** Scriabin, *Five Preludes Op. 74, No. 3*, mm. 1-14.

through a rigorous harmonic and architectural style. One of the techniques unifying the cycle with varied thematic profile is the rhythmic and melodic ostinato placed in the accompaniment, offering the feeling of eternal, non-chronological time. Concurrently, the building and thematic variation technique is detached from the generating-structuring capacities of the pitch system – also represented this time by the octatonic mode. Stopping at Prelude No. 3, conceived in the  $O_3$  form of the mode, we can notice the capitalization on its binary symmetrical structure of dividing in two tritones, in constituting the two stanzas – A and A' – through the thematic transposition by a descending augmented fourth (see Ex. 7). Leading our observations to an area of drafting an idea, we discover a system of capitalizing on structural intervals: the ascending path of the thematic arch is created by sequencing the motif *a* at the tritone (A# – E), while the *descensio* line offers tight formulations of motif  $a_1$ , restated every time at an interval of minor third (A – F# – D#), composing the entire tritone interval. A third tritone (F# – B#) constitutes the ostinato accompaniment in the bass.

Closely related to the general suspended sound is the thematic dramaturgy offering a structural example of unraveling. We refer here to the itinerary of motif *a*, first of all underlined through re-exhibition (transposition), subsequently reduced to the second component cell,  $a_1$  (in traditional terms: continuation through motif division), concentrated in the space of a measure –  $a_1'$  and  $a_1''$  – and dissolved in a figured pedal, obtained by repeating and transposing figure *y*, composed of the last three notes of the initial motif (mm. 9-12).

The fluency of all structural components has been obtained through apparently insignificant details: the moment of imbrication of motifs *a* and  $a_1$  (m. 4); the anticipation of the thematic restatement in A' through the pitch compenence of harmony at the end of the first stanza (mm. 11-12).

## CONCLUSIONS

Scriabin's pitch system leaves tonal harmonic functionality but does not conquer a completely new territory such as atonality, serialism, and geometrical modalism. The reminiscences of gravitational harmony – the mystical chord, a vertical concentrate of the acoustic scale, representing the extension of harmony in the post-romantic period; the octatonic mode, a perfect balance between diatonicism and chromaticism; the major-minor mode – are reflected in the temporal structuring of form, in the overlapping of juxtaposition-based form, variation and the developing form. The reflexes of romantic dramaturgy are expressed, with Scriabin displaying the new sounds in the pattern of an established form.

The analysis of his last work (Five Preludes Op. 74) proves the compositional method advancing towards a superior level of rigor, with the structural relationship between the pitch system and the construction of musical time in perfect coherence. Through these works Scriabin reaches higher level of structuralism than the one manifest in Arnold Schoenberg's atonal Three Piano Pieces Op. 11 (1909), Six Little Piano Pieces Op. 19 (1911), works built on the variation of the unique intervallic cell (Vasiliu 2002: 62-87). The singularity of Scriabin's vision can also be observed in relation to Debussy. While the French creator capitalizes on new modal sonorities in the chromatic space, in order to convey unto form the freedom of kaleidoscopic association, Scriabin is looking for freedom of spirit within the rigor of symmetry, unity and fluency in order to deepen one and the same state.

English version by Emanuel Vasiliu

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