

“The Path to Scriabin”: A celebration in Moscow

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One hundred years after his death, the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) remains one of the most enigmatic figures in music history. His legacy is unusually difficult to circumscribe. Within his lifetime he was known internationally as a pianist, yet his breathtakingly innovative compositions still challenge us from performative, interpretative, and analytical standpoints. Although his output of solo piano music and orchestral tone poems seem to tether him to the nineteenth century, the radical harmonic language and conceptual design of his final works marks him as a futurist visionary. Scriabin's belief in transformative power of performance was nourished by the intellectual foment of Russia's Silver Age, but he was also part of an [international modernist movement](#) that developed startling new formal techniques in order to communicate the spiritual through art. Only a handful of composers carried Scriabin's late method forward, and so he is often regarded as less influential than Schoenberg. However, Scriabin's experiments with sound-light correspondence inspired early pioneers of electronic music and musical visualization, two of the most significant (yet understudied) genres of the twentieth century.

Far from being an obscure figure, Scriabin the man emerges in letters, photographs, and reminiscences by his contemporaries. Faint echoes of Scriabin the performer sound on the pianola recordings he made in 1908 and 1910, some of which are available on [YouTube](#). We might think we can know Scriabin the composer through the hundreds of piano works, the piano concerto, and the five symphonies, but anyone who examines one of Scriabin's scores published after op. 60 would sense that there is a powerful dimension to the music beyond the notes. His late manuscripts are full of mysterious suggestions: *le rêve prend forme (clarté, douceur, pureté); épanouissement de forces mystérieuses; l'épouvante surgit, elle se mele à la danse délirante*. Scriabin once remarked to his friend Leonid Sabaneyev, “music, surely, takes on idea and significance when it is linked to a single plan within a whole view of the world.” But what was this worldview? The score annotations, the musings he recorded in his notebooks and in the margins of his personal library are nearly impossible to understand as they lie on the page, unmoored from the rich mixture of Russian mystic symbolist theory, German philosophy, contemporary psychology, Theosophy, and Hindu and Buddhist literature that he consumed and personalized. Yet we must seek to understand it, because as those who knew Scriabin attested, his worldview holds the key to understanding the music.

Such a complex figure has suffered from the division of music into rarefied academic subdisciplines and from a scholarly reluctance to take his mysticism seriously. It is becoming increasingly clear that viewing Scriabin through any single lens distorts the vision of the whole. When diverse perspectives are shared, however, a much fuller image can be constructed. On April 24-27, the [Scriabin House and Museum](#) in Moscow hosted “The Path to Scriabin,” an international, multidisciplinary celebration of Scriabin's music and legacy on the centennial of his death. The event was organized in cooperation with the [Glinka Museum of Musical Culture](#), which holds a vast collection of Scriabin's musical manuscripts and letters, and the [Tchaikovsky Conservatory](#), where Scriabin studied and taught, and which preserves numerous first edition scores.

The conference was the largest in the Scriabin Museum's history, bringing together musicians, musicologists, music theorists, archivists, artists, and designers from cities across Russia as well as from Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United States. Nearly fifty papers addressed topics such as Scriabin's musical style

and compositional techniques; his relationships to his contemporaries; his reception, legacy, and mythology; his influence in nations outside Russia; issues related to the performance of his music, and issues related to understanding the existing documentary evidence. Scholars did not shy away from Scriabin's philosophy and its possible sources. Elvira Zelenin (Russia) reviewed periodicals held in Scriabin's personal library, which included several esoteric journals; Yatsek Shershenovich (Poland) suggested relationships between Scriabin's prometheanism and the Anthroposophic conception of man; Guillaume Fournier (France) discussed Scriabin's notion of religious ecstasy; Anastasia Gacheva (Russia) and Vladimir Chinayev (Russia) elucidated Scriabin's connection to Russian Symbolism.

Scriabin's multifaceted legacy was honored in correspondingly diverse ways. His powerful contributions to the piano repertoire were featured in concerts by Pavel Shatskiy, a Russian pianist affiliated with the Scriabin Museum; [Atanas Kurtev](#), professor at the Pancho Vladigerov National Academy of Music in Bulgaria; [Veljko Glodić](#), professor of piano at the Zagreb University Conservatory of Music in Croatia; and [Helena Basilova](#), a Russian-born pianist raised in the Netherlands. Scriabin's combination of music and color in his *Prometheus, Poem of Fire* is regarded as a pioneering effort in the field of musical visualization, an art form which has entered new phase with the advancement of digital technologies. Conference attendees viewed "The DNA of an Angel," a 3-D visualization of the *Divine Poem*, op. 43 created by the fractal artist Alexey V. Osipenko. The [Scriabin Lab](#), a team of digital designers affiliated with the Scriabin Museum, presented an overview of their many exciting projects including a lighted performance of Scriabin's [Prometheus, Poem of Fire in Gorky Park](#) last year. Scriabin's symbolic importance to the development of electronic music in Russia was honored with a concert for [ANS synthesizer](#), musical visualizations, and theremin performed by [Olesya Rostovskaya](#). A new play entitled *Five Words of Farewell* paid tribute to Scriabin's interest in the theurgic potential of theatrical performance. The play took audience members through a spiritual journey based on the progression Scriabin outlined in his last works.

The conference culminated on April 27 with a day of music and commemoration. Participants gathered at the Novodevichy Cemetery to lay flowers on Scriabin's grave, accompanied by young members of the Second Moscow Cadet Corps, Scriabin's own unit. Two symbolic concerts flanked the tribute at the cemetery, one retrospective, the other forward-looking. In the morning, an audience assembled in Scriabin's own apartment to hear the incomparable [Nicolai Luganski](#) perform Scriabin's music on his famous Bechstein piano. As the Tenth Sonata, op. 70 glittered and thundered throughout the room, audience members packed into the small space could feel vibrations coming up from the floorboards, penetrating their legs and bodies. Scriabin insisted that "everything is vibration," and in that moment it was true.

The afternoon concert featured twenty-one winners of the A. N. Scriabin scholarship competition for piano performance. Some of the more recent recipients were in their early teens, while returning laureates of the 1990s have now established successful performing careers. This concert was a living testament to the Scriabin Foundation's commitment to nurturing future interpreters of the composer's music. The program was astonishing in its breadth (over fifty selections of piano music from op. 3 through op. 74), in its length (nearly three hours) but especially in the artistry of the young pianists. The Russian school cultivates a unique, distinctive sound for Scriabin, and in the hands of these interpreters he sounded nothing like Chopin or Debussy. One standout of the afternoon was Pavel Shatskiy, who is currently assisting Valentina Rubtsova in the preparation of the new Urtext edition of

Scriabin's complete works. With Shatskiy's meticulous pedaling, stratification of textures, and intricate melodic shaping, Scriabin sounded freshly modern and compellingly unfamiliar.

The Scriabin Museum, while maintaining its role as conservator of the past, is eagerly looking toward the future. A recent renovation and expansion facilitates greater visibility and public access. There is now an exhibition space specifically designed for the digital display of archival materials and a new larger concert hall equipped with lights and projectors to accommodate multimedia performances. Such facilities support an ambitious set of programs such as the popular Nights at the Museum, the Scriabin Lab productions, as well as a packed concert series featuring classic, avant-garde, and popular music performed by Russian and international artists.

"Who will finally put Scriabin back together again?" the Russian-American musicologist [Richard Taruskin](#) once queried. His question reflected disappointment at a series of narrowly-focused English-language studies that appeared in the decade after 1972, the centennial of Scriabin's birth. Taruskin called for "a framework for a new appreciation of Scriabin" which he believed required "a great deal of future research, amounting virtually to an as yet nonexistent subdiscipline." Much has changed since then. New sources have come to light, but perhaps even more importantly, a new spirit of interdisciplinarity in music scholarship and a frankness regarding Scriabin's mysticism promises to heal the fissures of his fractured reception. Technological developments of the past 43 years nearly rival those that occurred within Scriabin's own lifetime, making international communication and collaboration easier than ever before. (You can follow the Scriabin Museum on [Facebook](#).) Still, a century of myth and misinformation is difficult to counteract, and there is much work to be done. Perhaps in the next 100 years we might come closer to understanding Scriabin in all his dimensions. The Scriabin Museum is showing us the path.

Images:



Leonid Sabaneyev, Tatiana Schloezer, and Alexander Scriabin on the banks of the Oka River, 1912.



Scriabin creating a pianola recording for Welte Mignon, 1910.

Photographs courtesy of the Scriabin Museum (pending permission)



Left to right: Alexander Serafimovich Skryabin, president of the Scriabin Foundation; Alexander Lazarev, Director of the Scriabin House and Museum; Vladimir Lysenko, Director General of the Glinka Museum of Musical Culture; Valentina Rubtsova, Deputy Director of Scientific Work for the Scriabin Museum and chief editor of Scriabin's complete works.



Nastasia Lazcrev in *Five Words of Farewell*



Nikolai Luganski performing on Scriabin's Bechstein piano, April 27 2015.



Graveside memorial for Alexander Scriabin, April 27, 2015.