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## SKRYABIN'S MUSIC

Alexander Nikolayevich Skryabin died on April 27, 1915, in Moscow, whither he had gone for the purpose of rehearsing his new composition, the Prologue to his monumental "Mystery." In 1906-1907 Skryabin gave a series of concerts in America.

**H**ISTORY with all its cataclysms consists in the clashing of ideas on the surface of life, on the plane of physical existence. Music is the conflict of ideas in the depth of being, where ideas are begot and born. A melody is essentially a thought, only it is a thought either too ancient and forgotten, or, as the case may be, too novel, delicate and fine, too unusual and daring to find an articulate expression in human language. To use Schopenhauer's words, "the musician utters the highest wisdom in a language unknown to his reason." Skryabin's art is a fiery protest against this fatal disharmony between his reason and his artistic will.

Let us take one of his simple *études* with an elementary lyrical theme, such as despair. Its minor is unbridled and infinitely depressing. Something Slavic, all-too Slavic. It sounds like Chopin or Chaykovsky (Tchaikovski). But there is a peculiar quality about this music; it is pervaded with a muffled sound of knocking—yes, not crying, but knocking. A man knocks his head against a wall.

It is as if one were repudiating and anathematizing, tearing asunder and scattering something; the sadness grows in poignancy and the despair of the sobbing sounds become deeper and deeper, yet

—strangely enough—the knocking is stronger and more persistent. The wall is not broken through, but it is thoroughly shattered. The melody ends abruptly in an accord which is both weary and triumphant; the struggle has resulted in a deadlock, but the faith in the impregnability of the wall is undermined. That is what "despair" means in Skryabin's language.

Here we come face to face with one of Skryabin's most fundamental ideas. It can be formulated thus: *there is nothing impossible for the creative will; this I know*. That is the crimson thread that runs through all of Skryabin's artistic aspirations and achievements.

This principle is in direct contradiction to the antique idea of Fate, the great formative force which has determined the development of modern German music. Alone and helpless in the ruthless grip of indifferent Nature, man writhes with fear and anger and pierces the air with the "goat-song"—*tragœdia*. This idea together with the pathos of human purity, innocence and divinity summarizes all of German music. But of what profit to a man, asks Skryabin, is his essential goodness, if he is limited in his potentialities by Fate? And if man is truly God's effigy, why should he not equal divinity not only in goodness,

but also in might? This daring idea, which before Skryabin had never been embodied in music, is the basis of his musical philosophy. It is essentially *the deification of creative personality*.

The crystallization of this view accounts for the crisis in Skryabin's musical activity, which is thought to have occurred in the year 1902, when after the *Poème Tragique* and *Poème Satanique* came the amazing Second Symphony. From that time on this mystic philosophy is felt in every new work of the master, and finally triumphs in *Prometheus*. It must not be forgotten that all Skryabin had written in late years he considered as fragmentary sketches for *The Mystery*, the great work which was the dazzling but unrealized dream of his life. *The Mystery* was to embody the clash of the two irreconcilable, metaphysical ideas or rather conceptions of the world, which tore in two the artist's soul.

One idea carried him on its wings from victory to victory, onward to dazzling heights and shoreless horizons. The other was inseparable from the first and fed on its failings and weaknesses; it was like a serpent twisted around a soaring eagle and ever ready to sting its daring host. The first conception proclaimed the absence in this world—and in all possible worlds as well—of anything impossible, unrealizable, inaccessible for the creative personality. The second conception whispered in his ear something which sounded like this: "Yes, all that you strongly and genuinely desire will come true . . . but I know of no aim which can satisfy a human being." That is what accounts in Skryabin's theosophy for the preaching of the necessity for eternal and aimless strivings, for a self-sufficient art which is an aim in itself, etc. But on this

point Skryabin the artist knew more and better than Skryabin the thinker. Far from quietly and resignedly accepting the fatal absence of an aim, he never abandoned the arduous quest for this mysterious resplendent point, the supreme crowning of creative efforts.

What is, for example, the Third Sonata, one of the most powerful and sustained works of Skryabin, if not a spectacle of a soul which has set out on a quest for a goal shimmering in the far distance? The glowing feeling almost has the goal, the impetuous will seems to be about to seize it, but it glides out of the strong embrace of the slow thought. Later on the composer added to the sonata a lyrical text intended as a commentary to the musical flow of the piece. This text is very characteristic of the ideas and feelings which lend strength to his musical art.

"In the light, transparent mist there shimmers a star lost in the hazy distance, but clear."

A star lost in the distance, but clear! Or as Skryabin puts it in a letter he wrote before his death: "A task not as yet grasped in all its aspects, but vaguely sensed by a mind seeking for complex experiences."

But a star does not appear on the skyline for the sole purpose that we may admiringly contemplate it in its serene remoteness.

"Oh, that I may approach thee, thou distant star!" The passionate desire to reach the star at any effort—this is the seed whence eternally springs the ecstatic flight of the spirit away from the customary conditions of being. But a desire in and for itself, that is, a desire which is unconscious and irrational, carries a suicidal principle within itself. It is the kind of desire about which Skryabin says: "The poignant desire fraught with

madness and so infinitely sweet, that one wishes eternally to desire with no other aim than the desire itself." The means is substituted for the end. "In the burning joy of desiring vanishes the distant aim——"

As soon as the spirit notices the disappearance of the aim, it immediately uncoils the spiral wave of the wall's current.

"But no! I have set out on a joyful flight upward. My airy road leads to thee, O wondrous star, to thee whom I have freely created to serve my free flight as a goal."

But when the spirit hardened in "cosmic struggle" yields to "cosmic caresses," the free flight instantly turns into "a mad dance and a drunkenness beatific." The goal is again dimmed. "In my capricious play I forget thee, a whirlwind carries me away from thee." These two motives, now parallel, now intertwined or joined, run all through the fabric of Skryabin's art.

The Third Symphony (The Divine Poem) ends in an epilogue "God Playing with Worlds." The finale of the "Poem of Ecstasy" is different. All the forces at the disposal of the orchestra, the organ, the chorus of bells, in reducing the harmonious intensity of the creative effort to the limit of the physical endurance of which the modern ear is capable, seem to put before the conscience the momentous question: "What then is music? Is it a drunken dance of sound waves, a meaningless whim, an aimless game, or is it a free flight, a well-planned displacement, a conscious mode of action?"

Now, the musical "poem of fire," entitled *Prometheus* is an attempt to give a definite answer to the question and to solve this dilemma.

It is true that here too, the composer seems to be intent on embodying the idea of free art, self-sufficient because of the absence of a supreme end. But the very placidity of the saturated tones and the harmonious monotony of colors, realized by Skryabin for the first time, announces that we are in the presence of something entirely unprecedented. From the purely artistic standpoint, too, the choice of the poem's subject would be unhappy, if we accept it to be the intention of the work to embody "aimless" art. Why then Prometheus, and not Sisyphus or the Danaids? To variegate their work and declare it to be free, self-sufficient play would be more plausible than to present Prometheus capricious and ecstatic. The word "Prometheus" means—the foreseeing, he who looks forward. The grandeur of Skryabin's last symphony consists in that its Prometheus is true to himself and remains Prometheus in spite of the vulture of aimlessness which tortures him. The Titan broods over something, and he will accomplish his plan in spite of Jupiter and of Fate itself.

In his time that ancient ravisher of celestial fire in all probability greatly perplexed mankind who could but pray to the Thunderer that he would send down a fiery arrow. What did he do? Days and nights he sat in the cave and "rubbed wood against wood," instead of devoting himself to useful work, until suddenly "the wood grew black, the smoke uncoiled its rings and the reluctant twigs began to blaze with fire."

Then began a new era in the history of culture.

What then is the new Prometheus after? Oh, he wants nothing. . . . Nothing . . . if you do not see as yet the other fire, the infinitely more precious fire which mankind knows how to

use, to preserve and to transmit from generation to generation, but which it neither knows how to produce nor even dares to. It is not the fire which melts copper and chases away darkness, but the better fire which blazes in the heart and shines through the soul.

Skryabin invented a special optical apparatus for the purpose of accompanying the musical "symphony of fire" by the play of color waves. This and other "modernistic tricks" unhallowed by musical traditions were severely censured.

What is all this for? And why, furthermore, call upon all the artists "to achieve the reunion of the disconnected arts and to bring together spheres hitherto wholly distinct."

In the projected "Mystery" the harmonious combination of optic and acoustic impressions was to be enriched by a symphony of flavors. This, to Skryabin, was "the apotheosis of the universal genius in its triumphant struggle with spiritual isolation, the basal curse of humanity."

To uproot all tragedy, all possibility of a tragical conception of the world, this was the mystic dream of Skryabin's existence. A "Mystery" can be generally defined as *the transition from tragedy to liturgy*, from isolation to union, from the "goat-song" of a solitary hero, helpless in his duel with Fate, to common action gradually doing away with the "fatal" antagonism of human and cosmic powers. "Mystery," in Skryabin's

conception, is Tragedy denying itself but still unaware of its liturgical nature. It is the vague, symbolic outline of common action overshadowed by survivals of tragical convulsions. The creative personality discards the masque of forlorn solitude, and under it is discovered its true Face. The whole is present in each part of the Cosmos rendered harmonious.

Behind the present conflict of nations, unprecedented in the annals of history, lies a clash of ideas. By furthering the triumph of this or that cycle of ideas in the depth of our spirit we determine the ultimate outcome of the present struggle. If the minds of men will grow accustomed to the idea that the old separateness of the arts is superannuated and that, furthermore, it is high time, not only symbolically, but in practice, to throw a span between the visible and the invisible world, between tones and rays, sounds and colors, then the foundation of a truly new art will be laid, an art which will attack the momentous task of annulling the gap between space and time. This is probably harder than to force the Dardanelles. But has not the last year taught us not to be afraid even of the most arduous tasks?

Only then shall we be able to revenge the death of giants of the spirit like Skryabin or Churlianis, who from different sides approached the edge of the abyss which separates color from sounds and who paid with their lives for their daring reconnoissance.

A. GORSKY.

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