

ALEXANDER SCRIBIN

Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor, Op. 20

BORN: Moscow, January 6, 1872

DIED: Moscow, April 27, 1915

WORK COMPOSED: 1896–97

WORLD PREMIERE: October 23, 1897, in Odessa. The composer played the solo piano part, and Vasily Safonov conducted.

This concerto begins in an unusual manner: an incomplete phrase for the orchestra hints at the first movement's principal theme. The piano completes the statement and leads to a full exposition of the theme by the orchestra, the soloist adding running commentary. A highlight of the theme-and-variations second movement is the third variation, slow in tempo and darkly poetic.

Alexander Scriabin, one of the most fascinating composers of the early modern period, retains a place in the active concert repertory chiefly through two orchestral pieces reflecting his flamboyant brand of mysticism. Both *The Poem of Ecstasy* and *The Divine Poem* express something of the occultism Scriabin adopted during the last dozen years of his life.

Scriabin's outlandish metaphysical ideas eventually led him away from conventional harmonies and rhythms toward a new and original idiom that shared many traits with the nascent modernism of Debussy, Bartók and other advanced composers active during the early years of the last century. But he was not always so visionary in either his philosophical outlook or his compositional style. Rather, his early works extended the manner of Chopin, with whom Scriabin, a superb pianist as well as a composer, was particularly enamored during his youth.

Chopinesque Romanticism certainly is evident in the piano concerto Scriabin wrote at age 24. The first of its three movements features glittering piano filigree and fluid rhythms in the manner of Chopin. It concludes with a haunting coda that brings unexpected pathos to the final moments.

Strings, playing muted, begin the second movement with a song-like theme of melting tenderness. This becomes the subject for several variations. The finale is exuberant in tone. Its main theme features dance rhythms and a Russian flavor which, together with the broad sweep of its rhetoric and throbbing chords from the piano, place the music close in style to Scriabin's classmate and early champion, Sergey Rachmaninov.

Scored for solo piano; 2 flutes and piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings.

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