

Scriabin's *Mysterium* and the Birth of Genius¹

By

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The Age of Scriabin

At the time of his death in Moscow on Easter Day 1915, Alexander Nikolaevich Scriabin was among the most famous artists of his time. It is virtually impossible for us here and now in the 21st century West to understand Scriabin's celebrity or influence then. Boris Pasternak spoke of Scriabin as "not only a composer, but an occasion for perpetual congratulations, a personified festival and triumph of Russian culture" (1959, p. 44). But while the music of Russian composers such as Moussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff and Stravinsky is a staple of Western concert halls, Scriabin's bold masterpieces are heard relatively rarely outside his native country.

The very nature of Scriabin's genius, which strove to overcome the confines of music itself, may paradoxically be responsible for his neglect. This Promethean composer single-handedly evolved an increasingly daring musical language that broached the barrier of conventional tonality without losing its sensual appeal to the human spirit.

Scriabin sought to be more than a mere composer of symphonies, concertos and sonatas, and his musical explorations at their most far-reaching were qualitatively different from the atonality and serialism of more famous modernist composers such as Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. Music for him was an expression of a transcendent reality which ultimately demanded other modalities of revelation.

Having arrived at the juncture of tonal crisis, this 'end' of music as it were, Scriabin endeavoured to create a synthesis of all the arts in a unique spectacle of majestic proportions: the "Mysterium." Incredibly enough, while in the throes of this creative effort Scriabin fully and literally believed that the performance of his Mysterium would bring about the apocalyptic demise of the known world to usher in an age of ecstasy.

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Was this madness or genius?

Any attempt to answer this question requires an understanding of the conception, evolution and psychological function of the *Mysterium* and its relationship to Scriabin's musical expression. To this end I will provide the reader with a brief biographical sketch emphasizing salient events and conditions that permitted Scriabin to become "one of the most original and unconventional creators in the history of music" (de la Grange, 1971-2, p. 36).

The man who left the material world on Easter entered it, fittingly enough, on Christmas Day in 1871 (Old Style) in Moscow. Scriabin's mother, Lyubov Petrovna Shchetinina (1849-73) was herself an extraordinary musician, first among the rare female virtuosos of the piano, having graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatory with the Great Gold Medal in 1867. Her piano teacher was none other than Theodor Leschetizsky, the most renowned pedagogue of the day, among whose pupils numbered Brailowsky, Gabrilowitsch, Horszowski, Moiseiwitsch, Paderewski, Schnabel and many others. Tchaikovsky was overheard describing her as a true virtuoso – but, ominously enough, with insufficient stamina to sustain a career (Bowers, 1996, I, 104).

Scriabin's father Nikolai (1849-1914) broke away from his family's military tradition to study law and eventually joined the Russian diplomatic service. He and Lyubov were married in the Fall of 1870.

So dedicated to music was Lyubov that she performed a demanding recital when she was seven months' pregnant and a solo concert just five days before Scriabin was born! By the time she gave birth she was already ill and ten days afterwards her lungs were so afflicted that the infant was removed from her presence to prevent contagion. A wet nurse had been hired and the infant's paternal aunt – another Lyubov (Lyubov Alexandrovna) – assumed the primary caretaking role in his life: she had, quite literally, fallen in love with the newborn, and swore to herself that she would dedicate her life to his.

Scriabin's mother improved temporarily and she began to practice briefly again at the piano, even introducing her sister-in-law to relatively simple pieces and playing four-hand arrangements with her as well. But soon again her condition deteriorated and she was whisked away to the Dolomites in September 1872. She died there seven months later of consumption at the age of 23, her husband in accompaniment, her infant son in the dotting arms of his aunt and grandmothers.

Scriabin's father left the household to pursue a diplomatic career, eventually remarrying in 1880. He was a rare and inconsistent presence in his son's life. Scriabin himself had become the centre of his Aunt Lyubov's life and by the time he was three years old she had assumed nearly complete responsibility for his upbringing, taking charge away from the grandmothers.

The young child was lavished with love and with music and from his earliest days he evinced fascination with and talent for musical expression. He became a bona fide musical prodigy. At the age of seven Scriabin began to construct complicated toy pianos, complete with soundboards, pedals, moveable keys and wires. He also

wrote dramatic pieces which he performed with a puppet theatre of his own making. But because of general nervousness and delicacy – he was a thin, pale child apparently – and fits of unhappiness, he was brought to see a medical specialist by his worried aunt, who was however assured that nothing was wrong which could not be remedied by means of wholesome food and clean air.

Scriabin's interest in music began to consume him. He preferred the piano to toys and spent hours at a time improvising and playing by ear. His ever-caring and ever-vigilant aunt, determined to nurture such talents, took the young boy to none other than the great pianist-composer Anton Rubinstein who sagely advised her to let him develop freely and without coercion.

Scriabin received his first formal musical lessons from Georgy Konyus, for whom he began to compose as well as play. Then Sergey Taneyev, a tremendous pianist and head of the piano department at the Moscow Conservatory, accepted him in preparation for entrance into the Conservatory. Through Taneyev Scriabin was guided to study piano with the leading teacher in Moscow, the notorious Nikolai Zverev.

Zverev was a strict and sadistic disciplinarian who counted Sergey Rachmaninoff among his pupils, and who was utterly opposed to fostering compositional talent among his students. Fortunately for Scriabin he was not, like Rachmaninoff, Goldenweizer and Pressman, a pensionnaire with Zverev, and thus was spared the excesses of coercion to which the pupils who resided in his home were subjected. In fact, Scriabin was touted as a favourite. In 1886 he wrote his first composition of note, the Etude in C# minor (op. 2, no. 1) following an injury to his right arm after a carriage accident. Scriabin was accepted into the Moscow Conservatory in 1888 on the strength of a performance at Zverev's: the entrance examination had been waived.

At the Conservatory he and Rachmaninoff were brilliant contemporaries. It may be hard for us to imagine the level of musicianship possessed by these luminaries, but Rachmaninoff was compared in talent to the young Mozart and was championed by the doyen of Russian composers, Tchaikovsky. Scriabin, for his part, incurred the unstinting enthusiasm of Safonov, the director of the Conservatory, who pronounced him 'cleverer than Chopin ever was,' and who described Scriabin's improvising as one of the greatest musical pleasures of his life (Bowers, 1996, I, p. 144). For both Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, the Beethoven sonatas were not felt to be demanding enough pianistically!

In 1891 Scriabin suffered a serious trauma, injuring his right hand while overpracticing Liszt's Don Juan Fantasy. This was a veritable catastrophe, threatening his entire career. But Scriabin responded creatively with his first major work, the Op. 6 Piano Sonata No. 1 in 1893, and then two compositions for left hand alone in 1894. Recovery was slow and by no means assured. In fact, pain in his hand returned just before his graduation recital, but despite this he played – the Don Juan Fantasy no less! As a result of Safonov's influence he was allowed to graduate, like Rachmaninoff, a year early; but unlike his great contemporary he was deprived of the Conservatory's highest prize owing to the enmity he had incurred

with Arensky, a professor with whom he had locked horns. Furthermore, he received a diploma in piano but not composition!

Nonetheless Scriabin was first and foremost a composer. Despite being a magnificent and rather unique pianist, he confined his playing to his own works, which most assuredly limited his material income. The decade following his graduation was a difficult one. He seemed to live in the white-heat of a Dostoevskyan fever, perilously close to breakdown, at times drinking much too heavily, suffering from migraines and especially grim fits of nervous agitation that tended to appear right before he composed a new work. He read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and began to keep notebooks filled with his own poetical and philosophical musings.

He fell in love but was rejected (which fortunately preserved his genius, as the object of his desires was to write many years later [Bowers, 1996, I, p.187]), and out of the ashes of the affair came the resplendent series of Etudes, Opus 8: brilliant, passionate, already enhancing the language of music with their new and complex sonorities. He was invited to Yasnaya Polyana by Tolstoy. Scriabin played for the Russian icon and was rewarded by the highest of compliments: Tolstoy is quoted as saying that one could tell from this single piece (a prelude) “that he is a great artist...” (Bowers, 1996, I, 197).

Scriabin attracted a patron in Mitrofan Belayev, a veritable Maecenas, many years older, who supported him financially and published his compositions through his own press. As is typical of such relationships Belayev was at times domineering, overbearing and caustic, driving Scriabin incessantly to exercise his gift of composition; and the composer could be forgetful, dilatory, procrastinating and rebellious. Belayev however was a godsend who not only helped to launch the fledgling composer's career, but provided the goading stimulus to create -- and the bread with which to feed a family.

In 1897 Scriabin married Vera Isakovich, a concert pianist who despite their later marital turmoil and separation would remain a devoted and magnificent ‘Scriabinist.’ It was not a good match. He became a father in 1898, unready and unfit for the obligations of paternity; Vera bore him four children in all.

In 1903 Scriabin fell in love with Tatyana Schloezer, who would eventually become his common-law wife and with whom he would remain until his death. However in 1904 he seduced a 15-year old student from St. Catherine's Institute, where he taught music, occasioning even more difficulty for his love-life and his finances, since his enforced resignation resulted in a diminution of income. He broke with Vera that same year and openly took up with Tatyana, but through it all, the wandering trips abroad, through the poverty and agitation and irresponsibility and personal chaos, and against the backdrop of immense social unrest soon to spill into revolution, Scriabin composed....

The last decade of his life was “relatively” stable and marked by the emergence of genius. Practical concomitant developments included the commitment to Tatyana; the loss of Belayev and the appearance of another life-saving patron (Margarita Morozova); a visit to America; the championship of conductor Serge

Koussevitsky, with whom Scriabin toured; friendship with the inventor of dialectical materialism, Georgy Plekhanov; an immersion in Mysticism; and the achievement of world fame. Most importantly it was throughout this time that Scriabin's devotion to the *Mysterium* intensified, guiding him, sheltering his art, and serving as the fulcrum for creative effort. Scriabin died in Moscow from septicaemia stemming from a furuncle on his lip, sketches for the *Mysterium*'s prelude in the form of the "Prefatory Act" lying open on his piano.

The Artist as Prometheus

To understand better the role Scriabin had inhabited it is necessary to understand the centrality and all-importance Scriabin attached to his artistic mission and to art generally. This is well-illustrated by two anecdotes.

In 1907 in Paris when the famous impresario Diaghilev had been guilty of a certain carelessness regarding the procurement of tickets, Scriabin uncharacteristically screamed at him: "You allow yourself to talk to me this way! You forget art. We are artists. We create it, and you merely flutter and strut about its edges selling it. Without us, who would want to know you? You would be less than nothing on this earth!" (Bowers, 1996, II, p. 169)

And during the tour along the Volga with conductor Koussevitsky, when Scriabin overheard a politician being complimented, he responded vehemently: "Politicians and bureaucrats are not to be praised. Writers, composers, authors and sculptors are the first-ranking men in the universe, first to expound principles and doctrines, and solve world problems. Real progress rests on artists alone. They must not give place to others of lower aims..." (Bowers, 1996, II, p. 215).

For Scriabin, and for many of his Russian contemporaries, the artist's role was sacred: in fact, it was clearly Promethean, bearer of knowledge, carrier of light. And light, "particularly the sun, is the single and most important image associated with Scriabin, his work, and his thought" (Matlaw, 1979 p. 11). "When you listen to 'Ecstasy' look straight into the eye of the Sun!" Scriabin told a friend (Bowers, 1996, II, p. 135).

It was the artist, and the artist alone – not the scientist or politician – who could offer to mankind a form of gnosis achieved through the experience of ecstasy and the act of creation that brought it about. And it was to this mission of artistic creation that Scriabin was unyieldingly faithful despite all else.

Because Scriabin was also a synaesthete – someone for whom the perception of sound was simultaneously and inextricably linked to visual colour – the musical state was particularly intense. In his last Symphony, "Prometheus – The Poem of Fire," Scriabin attempted an innovation in employing the synchronized projection of colours by a 'tastiera per luce' or keyboard of lights while the orchestral music was played.

All of which brings us to a general discussion of the unique characteristics of Scriabin's music, a discussion which can no longer be delayed.

Music was, so to speak, Scriabin's native language, the means by which he most eloquently could express his holistic distillation of self and world. But music, it must be understood, was a means to something else. "To be regarded merely as a musician would be the worst fate that could befall me," he once remarked to friend and critic Sabaneev (1931, p.790), who noted in this attitude the "radical distinction between him and possibly every other composer, except, perhaps, Beethoven and Wagner" (p. 790). Music for music's sake was simply anathema.

Scriabin's music cannot of course be adequately described in words: it must be listened to, absorbed, experienced. But there is general agreement on certain qualities that mark his work.

First, there is what I term a tremendous *concentration*: by means of relatively few notes Scriabin conveys an extraordinary breadth of emotion. He attempts to eliminate the superfluous, and thus the product is extremely condensed and intensely charged. One of his brief but magnificent piano preludes may be said to contain more value than many a garrulous and long-winded symphonic work.

Second, there is a palpable *sensuality* to the music. For example, Scriabin wrote to Tatyana about his "Poem of Ecstasy" thus: "How you will envy me. You bemoan the fact that you cannot find new words for love and caresses. I have, though, and oh, what words they are! When I see you, I will speak them to you, which means I will play them for you. I have never made such love before!" (Bowers, 1967, p. 4). It was once remarked that when Scriabin himself played the piano it was as if he were making love to a woman (Bowers, 1967, p. 22), and also that he had succeeded in making the piano sound not like a piano (Bowers, 1996, I, p. 144). However one puts it, the sensual element is inescapable: an effusion of love earthly and in the later works more divine perhaps, is ever-present.

Third, the music is '*genuine*': Tolstoy used the word 'sincerity' to describe it, but by this I mean the absence of anything artificial, anything virtuosic for the sake of virtuosity, anything mathematical for the sake of fulfilling formal requirements – and more. It is that ineffable quality separating great art from all other kinds, a penetration to the depths of what is essential about the human condition.

Fourth, while it may seem absurd to speak of 'progress' in music – for example, can one be said to have made progress over Bach or Mozart? – *Scriabin's music became continually more daring, original and free*. While, for example, Rachmaninoff's stayed within a traditional harmonic framework, Scriabin's moved into novel terrain. Any art must to some extent mirror its age, but great art also goes beyond its age and lifts its auditors to some new plane, to new vistas. 2 As G. B. Shaw notes: "The great artist ... by supplying works of a higher beauty and a higher interest than have yet been perceived, succeeds, after a brief struggle with its strangeness, in adding this fresh extension of sense to the heritage of the race" (1908, p. 69).

One musicologist explains that Scriabin's "tonal and atonal procedures – which traditionally have been considered to be mutually exclusive – are both operative within integral musical structures" (Baker, 1980, p. 18). Another claims that "Scriabin's parallel evolution ... leads him not into 'atonality', but rather into a new kind of 'tonality' in which symmetrical partitionings of the semitonal scale by means of interval cycles generate new, totally consistent, referential harmonic structures" (Perle, 1984, p. 116).

And a third (from the authoritative Grove's Encyclopedia) avers that Scriabin "was able to abandon traditional tonal relationships in his music while maintaining a sense of tonal gravitation – or rather ascent", alluding to yet another descriptive aspect of the works, namely, the sense of flight, uplift or 'transporting burst' (Powell, 2001). Finally, theorist Varvara Pavlovna Dernova, who is credited with having decoded Scriabin's chordal and melodic construction, observed astonishingly that in Scriabin's last works almost none of his harmonies is ever repeated (in Bowers, 1973, p. 133)!

All of which is to say that the listener senses things new, challenging, different, and extremely exploratory. In a way one feels the progression from an earthly to a divine sort of love, and the transition to a language new enough to sound wondrously foreign but still somehow intelligible. There is no doubt that Scriabin was a tremendous innovator in music, always seeking the means to express with greater precision his unique apprehension of the world, always attempting to stretch the tools at hand and devise others. For his "Prometheus" symphony he wished to create new sonorities that would not be limited by the tempered tuning of the piano and orchestral instruments, microtonalities that could reproduce the exquisitely calibrated differences perceived by his ultra-discriminating ear.

Fifth, despite his masterful talent in orchestration, the instrument that preoccupied Scriabin was the *piano*, and it is in the works for piano that we hear how striking is his evolution of genius, particularly in the sequence of sonatas 5 through 10.

Sixth, there is the sense that Scriabin's music always conveyed something beyond itself, that *it continually sought to transcend its own limitations*, impossible as that may be, in the service of some greater form of experiential knowing.

Seventh, there is an extraordinarily *high ratio of masterpieces to works composed*, probably a testament to an uncanny ability to wed emotional expression to formal musical structure in such a way that compositions seem organically natural and inevitable.

But rather than take my word for these observations, let me offer you eye- (or should I say ear) –witness accounts of the effect of Scriabin's music on the very discerning personalities of the Pasternak brothers.

Boris Pasternak, author of the one of the 20th century's greatest novels, *Doctor Zhivago*, actually entitles the very first chapter of his autobiographical sketch "Scriabin." Pasternak made the acquaintance of Scriabin as a young boy of 12. In the woods adjacent to Scriabin's summer dacha Pasternak overheard Scriabin

composing at the piano his *Divine Poem* or *Third Symphony*. Here is how he describes it:

“Lord, what music it was! The symphony was continually crumbling and tumbling like a city under artillery fire, and was all the time growing and being built up out of debris and wreckage. It was brimful of ideas minutely worked out to a point that was indistinguishable from frenzy, and at the same time as new as the forest, breathing life and freshness and, indeed, arrayed, surely, in the morning of the spring foliage of 1903, and not of 1803. And just as there was not a single leaf in that forest made of crimped paper or painted tin, so there was nothing in the symphony that was falsely profound or rhetorically respectable...”(Pasternak, B., 1959, p. 36).

Alexander Pasternak, Boris's older brother, was no less impressed. Several years later he attended the rehearsals of Scriabin's "*Poem of Ecstasy*," and he reports:

“At these first rehearsals of *Ecstasy* – just as when we had listened from the bushes to the birth of the third symphony on the piano – everything seemed chaotic, as though a building were in pieces. But from the chaos of disparate elements each particle fell into its appointed place; to our joy and delight the building, its plan and its construction, began to be felt as a whole.... So deep are the impressions music can make on a 15-year old that, listening even now, to the *Divine Poem* or *Ecstasy*, no sooner has the first phrase sounded than I begin to tremble involuntarily, and images from those early years grip me again – the sound of masses of tumbling water, visions of the Creator in tumultuous joy roaring ‘I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end.’” (Pasternak, A., 1972, p. 1172).

Which brings us, at long last, to the key: Scriabin's *Mysterium*.

The *Mysterium*: Conception, Purpose, and Impossibility

I have elsewhere (Garcia, 2004b) enumerated three factors that I believe to have been essential to the development of genius in Scriabin:

1. the inculcation of liberty and omnipotence in the young male child by a maternal figure (Scriabin's Aunt Lyubov) whose sole aim is focused on the child, in conjunction with a weak or absent father
2. the unstinting support in young manhood of at least one powerful mentor who, if he himself is a creator, has been eclipsed by the young talent (Safonov)
3. the response to the first great crisis of youth by the act of creation (composition of the *First Sonata* after the injury to his right hand)

Further study impels me to add a fourth factor, the *Mysterium* itself. Exactly how it did so, and an elaboration of the many purposes it served, I will offer below, but

first let us consider the tremendous obstacles confronting the serious creative artist. How is he or she to create *ab nihilo*? What allows him to break out of the known boundaries of his art? How can he remain undistracted by the welter of hectic influences from peers, teachers or past masters? Whence does he derive the courage necessary to create something novel and deeply compelling, emotionally resonant and beautiful? How does he preserve the sense of mission, the sense of urgency and extraordinary significance of creating?

The utter intensity and sincerity of Scriabin's Promethean way of life – which occasioned criticism for its megalomaniac and delusory narcissism from some – belies any pose. And his most extravagant pronouncements, wherein for example, he identified with God, or, as we shall see in the *Mysterium*, wherein he believed in the power of his art to transfigure the world, are understandable if we consider that Scriabin simply gave utterance to the inner convictions of any notable artist. He lived as every artist secretly (or not so secretly) believes, i.e., imbued by a sense of omnipotence fostered by the conviction that through his work the world will indeed be transformed. Without the unshakeable belief in the critical significance and power of art, the strength for meaningful (vs. trivial) creation cannot be nourished.

It is unclear exactly when the idea of the *Mysterium* took hold. Premonitions of it seem to have occurred as early as 1901, but a more definite shape for this project made itself felt in late 1903, when it began to interfere with the composition of an opera he had begun (and incidentally never finished).

What exactly was this *Mysterium*? It is nearly as impossible to summarize adequately as it must have been to accomplish. Scriabin envisioned it as a kind of immense liturgical rite, lasting seven days or perhaps longer and set against the backdrop of the Himalayas in India, during which the barrier between audience and performers would be dissolved to allow for a spiritual communion leading to an ecstatic dissolution and transfiguration of the world. All would perform and celebrate. All of the arts would be included – music, dance, theatre, poetry, visual colours. All of the senses too would be engaged – even taste and smell. Scriabin planned for bells to be dangling from the clouds and perfumes to be wafted. The *Mysterium* was a festival that would, by employing all the arts, allow for a transcendence of them and usher humanity into a new and more satisfying plane of existence where even gender seemed to be abolished. Initially Scriabin himself was to have been on 'centre stage' at the piano, but he later abandoned this idea.

Sometime in 1913, as the spectacle of the *Mysterium* became ever more grandiose and unrealisable, Scriabin decided that humanity needed to be prepared for this cataclysmic event and thus undertook the draft of a "Prefatory Act," a libretto and musical sketches for which survive. He even went so far as to purchase land in India to realize this dream. The Prefatory Act was the *Mysterium* brought down to earth and subjected to rational execution. Nonetheless, even this spectacle would be immensely greater in scope and intent than the most lavish of Wagnerian operas.

The dramatic action, so-called, that can be gleaned from the libretto of the Prefatory Act comprises the union of Masculine and Feminine Principles, of Wave and Light, the fall and redemption of a 'hero', and, finally, the spiritual emancipation of all the Earth's peoples through death and rebirth. (For particularly

insightful, detailed and comprehensive examinations of the *Mysterium*, see Morrison [1998] and Schloezer [1987].)

I surmise that the break from Vera, the falling in love with Tatyana, and the infusion of new creative achievements in his compositions were inextricably linked with the beginnings of the *Mysterium*. For Scriabin it is in fact impossible to separate his personal philosophical thinking from the music. He delved heavily in the Russian Symbolist movement and the Theosophical doctrines of Blavatsky; he read Bal'mont, Trubetskoy, Solovyov, and many others – all in his own peculiar way, assimilating what he felt would be important to his evolving ideas. His notebooks, about which he was extremely secretive, are filled with fascinating tortuous passages charting his personal voyage, an idiosyncratic melange. If one is given to generalities, one may say that Scriabin was a Mystic – and an undeniably erotic one at that!

The sum total of his esoteric thought is virtually incomprehensible on its own – but *the fact that these peregrinations were necessary to the composition of music must not be overlooked*. Many of his works, for example, were conceived as elements of the grand *Mysterium*. It would be a mistake, however, to concentrate so completely on the design for the *Mysterium* and ecstatic experience that we would lose sight of the emotional range of the musical compositions he bequeathed to us, wherein earthly human drama is depicted in astonishing variety.

The Mysterium was, in sum, a world Scriabin's genius created to sustain its own evolution. It was simultaneously a refuge, a protectorate, an ever-present inspiration – a realm to which he would incessantly reach but not grasp. It solved the problem of atonality and the approaching dead-end of classical music. And to function it required complete belief: what in mortals would be labelled a megalomaniacal delusion. Scriabin it seems lived his life in a permanent state of visionary artistic agitation, a life which the *Mysterium* would order so as to make bearable.

Only as a result of the *Mysterium* are we able to be graced with the groundbreaking, beautiful and magnificent compositions that flowed from his daemon: the sweep of the incomparable piano sonatas, the almost unbearable intensity of *Vers la Flamme* and the opus 74 preludes, and symphonic works such as the *Poem of Ecstasy*, the *Divine Poem*, and greatest of all, *Prometheus*, whose last few minutes may well be the most exciting in all of symphonic music.

Finally, within the *Mysterium* lies the very key to the psychological foundation of Scriabin's genius and to a general explanation perhaps of artistic mysticism itself.

The Lost World

What I am about to offer should under no circumstances be taken to reduce or diminish the greatness of Scriabin's artistic accomplishment; it is instead an attempt to probe into the depths of the secrets of creativity. My concern is not with philosophical, mystical or aesthetic ramifications, but rather with psychological underpinnings.

Certain essential and fundamental characteristics can be teased from the vast and intricate tableaux of the *Mysterium*, which Scriabin limned in his notebooks and conversations.

First, it is concerned with *transformation by death and rebirth*. Scriabin is aptly described as a revolutionary – one who is dissatisfied with the current world and seeks relentlessly to change it, and by changing to better it. This appears in his music as well as his philosophical ruminations, and in the behaviour of his everyday life itself.

Second, the *Mysterium* does away with the conventional bounds between performer and spectator: all are celebrants somehow as a boundary-lessness prevails, *a union and merger of participants*.

Third, the envisioned union of all the arts results in *a stimulation of all the senses*, an even grander extension of the synesthesia uniting sound and colour: in essence, taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing would all be engaged simultaneously. As Schloezer writes: “Scriabin’s *Mysterium* was to be a unified work of Omni-art consisting of visual, auditory, tactile, motoric, olfactory and gustatory ingredients. Its tissue is analytically divisible into separate but intimately connected parts, among them musical, poetic and plastic, constituting a grandiose system of sonorous edifices, colours, forms, motions, and physical contacts. But none of these components possesses self-sufficient validity; none can be performed or even evaluated separately from the others.... The *Mysterium* thus becomes the focal point of universal efflorescence and *imprints the cosmos with the attribute of oneness*” (1987, pp. 260-1, my emphasis).

Fourth, there is embedded within the *Mysterium* the notion of *omnipotence of thought*: Scriabin is the demiurge who considers himself the “creator, ruler and redeemer of the world” (Lunacharsky, 1921, p. 42).

Fifth, there is an undeniably *orgiastic character* attendant upon the plan and dramatic action, e.g., cosmic cataclysm, dance, blissful merger of Male and Female Principles, of Wave and Light, etc.

Sixth, there is the overarching theme of *Oneness*: the *Mysterium*, in action and intended result, would join all peoples together, obliterate disparities, erase conflict, eliminate gender and brings humankind to a form of ecstatic union or “oneness”.

Seventh, there is the inescapable air of *impossibility*.

Taking these elements into consideration, I believe we may reasonably aver that *the Mysterium is the artistic projection of Scriabin’s quest for and reunion with his mother through passage into the fantasied intrauterine environment*. It is after all only in the intrauterine environment, in the mother’s womb, where the senses are commingled and utopia is realized, where all is unity and omnipotence achieved. (As Ferenczi writes, “If, therefore, the human being possesses a mental life when in the womb, although only an unconscious one, -- and it would be foolish to believe that the mind begins to function only at the moment of birth – he must get from his existence the impression that he is in fact omnipotent. For what is omnipotence?

The feeling that one has all that one wants, and that one has nothing left to wish for" [1950, p. 219].)

Scriabin's conception of the *Mysterium* can be partially – and I emphasize 'partially' – understood as *the search for both his lost mother and his lost life within her*.

Sabanev writes that Scriabin apparently did not remember his mother, "but a large portrait of her always hung over his desk"! (1966, p. 258) – the desk where he fashioned his musical creations. Note well: it was not a portrait of his dear beloved Aunt Lyubov, but the portrait of the woman whose loss and absence he must undoubtedly have powerfully felt. This is what our Prometheus, bearer of light, searches for in the darkness of his past.

It was Scriabin's mother who was a piano virtuoso and whose musical talent and accomplishments were divulged to her son. Is it reading too much into things to interpret the young boy's elaborate construction of toy pianos, "innards" and all, and his virtual obsession with the instrument, as the expression of curiosity about this vanished presence whom he most assuredly must have identified with the piano and with music generally? Is it overstepping our own interpretive bounds to imagine that the 'languor' and yearning and sensuality of his music are a reflection of desires associated with his pianist-mother, in addition to his maternal replacements?

There is now compelling scientific evidence (Arabin, 2002) to demonstrate that prenatal 'memories' of speech and music are formed and have enduring effects on postnatal life. In Scriabin's case we know with certainty that as a foetus he was exposed to a tremendous amount of music as his mother practiced piano assiduously and as she performed. Remember: she gave major concerts when she was seven months pregnant, and also a mere five days before giving birth! I do not believe it is far-fetched to assume that such acoustic stimuli impinged on the perceptual apparatus of the foetus and that Scriabin was later moved unconsciously to discover and recreate in music the stimuli of that "unremembered" environment. What strikes the listener so often as distinctively ethereal and other-worldly in the music of Scriabin – and which contributes to its uniquely surpassing beauty – may very well be traced to this artistic quest.

The *Mysterium* returned Scriabin to his mother's womb through an oedipal (Promethean) *rite de passage*, and allowed his rebirth into a world where she would be present and life blissfully ecstatic. But *in the unconscious mind the wish for rebirth is paradoxically a wish for the imagined utopia within the womb*, and this imagined utopia is necessarily informed by earliest sensations and memories of postnatal infantile pleasure (including the sense of omnipotence that is a consequence of hallucinatory wish-fulfilment, and that 'blinding light' so often associated with bliss).

At the very end of the extant unrevised libretto for the Prefatory Act (Morrison, 2002, p. 103), Scriabin wrote:

We will all dissolve in the ethereal whirlwind

We will be born in the whirlwind!

We will awaken in heaven!

We will merge emotions in a united wave!

And in the splendid luster

Of the final flourish

Appearing to each other

In the exposed beauty

Of sparkling souls

We will disappear . . .

Dissolve . . .

Here of course we see just how daunting the psychology of creativity is. Here we are inevitably confronted by the shortcomings of our methodology, the gaps in our knowledge of the subject, the complexities and contradictions that lie at every turn of our formulations, the dangers of oversimplification, and the inexhaustibility of interpretive possibilities. For the architecture of the mind is such that oldest structures exist alongside more recent ones, and the most primitive pleasures and complexes and conflicts underlie and permeate their successors, giving testament to the infinite richness of human experience. But the majesty of artistic aspiration is made no less wondrous by a keener understanding of its unconscious roots. Indeed, may we not discern through Scriabin the pilgrimage of every great artist who in reaching for a lost and impossible realm of the remotest personal past bequeaths to the world works that enrich and elevate our future?

Coda

In one of the most brilliant elucidations of Scriabin's work, Anatoly Lunacharsky eloquently describes his shock at discovering, at the very end of Scriabin's notes, a frank realization of the limits of power of his thought -- a steep descent from omnipotence. "We see a man who rounded this cape of pride, who realized that he is only able to create the "Prefatory Act" in order to say to all people that life is wonderful, that creativity and even struggle, suffering and hatred are acts, which great souls will accept as colours of an infinitely diverse poem" (Lunacharsky, 1921, p. 43).

This inevitable obeisance to reality may have set the stage for the inroads of a bacterial infection which, beginning as a modest pimple on his lip, progressed to end Scriabin's earthly life. When the genius reaches the limits of creativity he dies.

Mahler too fell prey to a bacterial infection at a time when his creative fires had been extinguished (Garcia, 2000).

As Scriabin realized he was dying he cried out, "This is a catastrophe!" Too much work lay ahead for him to complete....

Yet strangely enough he and his fantastic impossible project have resulted in creations of magnificent beauty – and have also left an unanticipated legacy. The performance festivals and rock concerts of today are descendants of the *Mysterium*, employing as they do light shows and multimedia effects, and encouraging the spontaneous kinetic response of the audience.

On the other hand, classical music has reached a confusing cul-de-sac: the school of atonalists and serialists, now nearly a century old, holds little attraction for either performer or listener. All things do come to some kind of end. Perhaps the next great artistic advance will indeed be a synthesis of arts along the lines prescribed by one of history's great creative visionaries.

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A Postscript on Psychoanalysis and Art

Freud (1917) rather famously explained the resistances to psychoanalysis as springing from the succession of blows to human narcissism previously levelled by Copernican and Darwinian theory. Not only was the earth not the centre of the universe, the human species not materially different from its animal brethren, but man's very ego not master in its own house. Yet the ongoing virulence to psychoanalysis has always suggested to me the operation of other forces with perhaps even deeper roots.

Psychoanalysis occasioned the greatest modern revolution in human thought, and no activity of humankind cannot be touched by its insights in one way or other. Nonetheless, widespread ignorance of its findings and widespread illegitimate scorn are threatening to push its discoveries into a gloomy oblivion. For those of us who witness daily the indispensability of the psychoanalytic perspective, it is disheartening to hear everywhere misunderstanding and misrepresentation, particularly in academia. Freud was very clear about the nature of his work, and certain self-appointed defenders, who have sought to make of him a philosopher or novelist, should take heed:

psychoanalysis is above and beyond all, a science. A messy, incomplete and maddening one – as is the nature of any science – but a science nonetheless. When asked about the *weltanschauung* of psychoanalysis Freud (1933) unhesitatingly, and rightly, replied, that it was no more and no less than the *weltanschauung* of science. Period.

This I believe has been the source of bitter disappointment. The tremendous explanatory power which knowledge of the unconscious brought into our ken has not – like various philosophies or religions – ushered us into a realm of comforting compensatory illusion. Whereas science in other realms has provided us with clear accretion of power over the material world, as any cursory glance at the achievements of chemistry, biology or physics will attest, no similar power is the result of insight. Yes, the range of action may be extended, but the exchange of neurotic suffering for the common misery of mankind (Breuer and Freud, 1893-95, p. 305) is a hard culmination to bear. Of course this utter rejection of illusion implies an acceptance of the inevitability of death, while technological and other advances foster the primitive belief in immortality.

The source of this ubiquitous craving for illusion is the mind's inability to conceive of its own demise, and one may say that illusion is actually a necessity during the early stages of individual development: imagine, for example, a child's growth without the conviction of parental omnipotence.

Nonetheless, this longing for the blandishments of illusion persists in the vast majority of people into the furthest reaches of adulthood and 'maturity.' In its grosser manifestations we have the specifically detailed solaces of the after-life described by various religions; but more subtly, among even the most atheistic, persist beliefs in the ultimate betterment of humankind, beliefs that the work of science or humanism will result in the creation of a unified peaceful world for all... Yet even the most superficial examination of history shows that except for a relatively small privileged minority of the living progress has been limited.

Psychoanalysis, therefore, offers no spiritual consolation in the face of the exigencies of life and mortality. It does not teach one how to live, how to govern, how to find perfect happiness – even though it frees up energies hitherto bound that have interfered with experience of pleasure. This general disappointment with psychoanalysis's unwillingness and inability to fill the 'spiritual vacuum' accounts for the relentless virulence and rancour of its attackers.

But what of spirituality, so-called? Freud's beautiful analysis of the 'oceanic feeling' (1930, pp. 64-73), with its sense of limitlessness and of bonding with the universe as a whole, does not gainsay the persistence of this need, the insistence of its power, and the allure of being in love, which is but another of its manifestations. This however is properly the realm and responsibility of great art.

Freud was no stranger to the power of art, which he considered to be the apex of human achievement. It is art after all which uncovers truths but also provides that sense of boundary-lessness that connects all humanity and contains within even its darkest revelations (e.g., *King Lear*) a sense of hope. It is great art which enhances our humanity and enriches us by adding to the palette of experience, sensation,

feeling, 'apprehension'. And as a corollary one may say that one of the criteria for a truly successful analysis is the enhancement of the aesthetic capabilities of the analyst.

Indeed in the arts and humanities applied psychoanalysis has a great deal to contribute: it could potentially become the sorely needed lingua franca permitting sensible and intelligent discourse in an arena otherwise dominated by Babelian fractiousness and subjectivity. Among creative people there is a general and intuitive acceptance of the unconscious and an innate striving for a way to speak about its effects on their artistic activities, and here the possibilities for methodologically sound psychoanalytic applications are immense. (For instance, an experimental study in which I employed the psychoanalytic method as an aid to a classical pianist's interpretation of a musical composition has yielded promising results (Garcia, unpublished MS); so far as I know it is the first such formal application of psychoanalysis.

The relative lack of transparency of the analytic method of treatment has of course occasioned much debate. The human mind is so complex and the many kinds of intervention possible during treatment so varied that it is virtually impossible to explain simply and clearly to an outsider how a subject responds and grows.

But it is eminently possible to demonstrate how the application of free association in conjunction with what I have termed 'the principle of interpretive parsimony' (Garcia, 2004a) can result in verifiably testable analytic conclusions. My research into Rachmaninoff's emotional collapse following the performance of his First Symphony is just such an example (Garcia, 2004a). In this study my inferences were purposefully limited to and based solely upon Rachmaninoff's dictated memoirs (a finite text easily available to any interested reader), to the deliberate exclusion of all other sources of information -- an approach that was methodologically essential. Only after this investigation was complete did I then explore the secondary literature, which in all essentials confirmed my initial findings (Garcia, 2002). In this case both the transparency of the analytic method and confidence in its parsimonious application were demonstrated.

An offshoot of this experiment led to a comparison of Rachmaninoff and his relatively little-known contemporary Scriabin as examples, respectively, of talent and genius. In this work (Garcia, 2004b) I speculated on various environmental and psychological preconditions for the emergence of genius to account for the diverging paths of these two great musicians.

Further reflections on the unique life of Scriabin and his conception of the grandest and most grandiose artistic creation in our cultural history -- the "Mysterium" -- became the starting point for this current investigation into matters of genius, creativity and mysticism.

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