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"The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin" by Anatole Leikin

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Nearly a century after the death of Russian pianist-composer Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), his music remains as enigmatic as it was during his lifetime. His output is dominated by solo piano music that surpasses most amateurs' capabilities, yet even among concert artists his works languish on the fringes of the standard repertory. Since the 1980s, Scriabin has enjoyed renewed attention from scholars who have contributed two types of studies aside from examinations of his cultural context: theoretical analyses and performance guides. The former group considers Scriabin as an innovative harmonicist who paralleled the Second Viennese School's development of post-tonal procedures, while the latter elucidates the interpretive and technical demands required to deliver compelling performances of his music. Indeed, a flawless technique is no guarantee that a pianist can perform Scriabin's inscrutable scores convincingly. When Rachmaninoff toured Russia in 1916 playing all-Scriabin programs to commemorate the recently deceased composer, his well-intentioned tributes outraged attendees because the revelatory quality that had enthralled listeners when Scriabin performed his own works was sorely missing from Rachmaninoff's sober renditions. Grigorii Prokofiev, critic for the *Russkaia muzykal'naia gazeta*, observed, "You should have seen the disappointment with which the admirers of Scriabin's later piano works looked at each other as they heard the innocuous and prosaic interpretation of the *Satanic Poem*, or the academically chilled treatment of the Second and Fifth Sonatas."[1] The situation has improved little since then. Pianists' inability to summon the "special attitude and particular temperament" (Leikin, p. 279) that Scriabin's works require has been a major factor in his eclipse.

The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin by Anatole Leikin, Professor of Music at the University of California at Santa Cruz, fills in these knowledge gaps that have confounded pianists for decades. He builds upon research he published fifteen years ago in this journal as well as substantial work accomplished by his Russian comrade Pavel Lobanov, whose transcriptions of the composer's piano rolls appear throughout the

1. Quoted in Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 196.

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book.[2] These transcriptions, in fact, constitute the bulk of the book's material. Of its 294 pages (plus twelve pages of front matter), just over 100 pages contain prose. Although Leikin's commentary is lean, it is rich in detail and features meticulous analyses of eleven of the nineteen works Scriabin recorded on piano rolls.[3] These recordings include two sonatas and twelve miniatures on Hupfeld's Phonola in 1908 and nine pieces on the Welte-Mignon in 1910 (four works are duplicated on the Phonola rolls).

Chapter one, "The Music of Scriabin: Then and Now" addresses the discrepancy between the lack of interpretive clues in the composer's scores and his inimitable live performances, and Leikin asserts that the loss of Scriabin's unique performance style has had a "disastrous effect on his legacy" (p. 5). Although this contention is undeniable, Leikin's campaign to link lost performance traditions with the composer's decline in popularity leads him to disregard other factors that hindered Scriabin's posthumous reception, including political tides like Socialist Realism that dissuaded Soviet composers from emulating his style or even studying his music, as well as modernists' privileging of emotional restraint and economy of means, principles that Scriabin's later symphonies blatantly violate. Leikin cogently explains distinguishing features of the equipment used for Scriabin's two recording sessions. Hupfeld's Phonola was a player piano that had pencils affixed to the backs of each key; depressing a note made imprints on a paper roll, and these markings were transferred to a master roll that was fed through the device and required a "playerist" to execute any tempo and dynamic shifts. To prevent "deficiencies [in reproduction] in the hands of neophytes" (p. 10), Hupfeld engineers heavily edited the rolls, which makes it difficult to distinguish between what the artist actually played and the engineers' "corrections." The Welte-Mignon, on the other hand, was a fully automated reproducing piano and utilized electrical currents that triggered pneumatic mechanisms, and although the device had limited pedal and dynamic shadings, it stressed accuracy over perfection and is therefore more valuable historically because it faithfully documented what the artist played. Leikin further points out that the shock contemporary listeners often experience when listening to piano rolls is partially due to inconsistencies in playback techniques, but nonetheless, piano rolls supply crucial information about "pitches, rhythms, tempos, articulation, and alignment of notes against each other, along with some basic dynamic and pedal indications" (p. 17).

2. Leikin, "The Performance of Scriabin's Piano Music: Evidence from the Piano Rolls," *Performance Practice Review* 9, no. 1 (1996): 97-113. Lobanov, an expert on player pianos who recorded Scriabin's works for Melodiya in the 1960s, also wrote a book on the composer's piano rolls. See *A.N. Skriabin – Interpretator svoikh kompozitsii: analiz avtorskogo ispolneniia metodom na Vel'te-Min'one i Fonole* [Scriabin as an Interpreter of his Own Compositions: Analysis of the Composer's Performances Employing Methods Used to Decipher Notes on the Welte-Mignon and Phonola], Moscow: Iris Press, 1995.

3. The eleven works that Leikin examines are: [Welte] Etude, op. 8, no. 12; Preludes, op. 11, nos. 1, 2, and 13; Prelude, op. 22, no. 1; *Poème*, op. 32, no. 1, Mazurka, op. 40, no. 2; *Désir*, op. 57, no. 1; [Phonola] *Feuillet d'album*, op. 45, no. 1; *Sonate-fantasie*, op. 19; and the Third Piano Sonata, op. 23.

Chapter two, "Scriabin's Performing Style," establishes the special emphasis on touch and tone the composer gleaned from his Moscow Conservatory training, the lessons he learned from composition and piano teachers, the conventions of late nineteenth-century piano performance, and his idiosyncratic approach to playing the instrument, especially his pedaling. Two key points emerge from this discussion; the first concerns Scriabin's composing methods, and the second involves his approach to performance. Although twentieth-century historians condemned the composer's reliance on four-bar phrases and sequential repetition, Leikin argues that this habit was a "necessity rather than a flaw of craftsmanship" (p. 28) because a surfeit of even phrase lengths gave his works an internal stability that offset the incessant tempo fluctuations he used in performance. The second issue is Scriabin's alleged improvisatory playing, and Leikin asserts that extemporization was antithetical to the composer's creative ideology. Scriabin's generous application of rubato (Leikin distinguishes between three types) was "unquestioningly the most striking feature" (p. 27) of his playing style but was "carefully calculated" (p. 30) to articulate phrase structures and formal divisions. Rarely does the composer maintain the same pace for more than a few bars, and the fastest tempos in a given performance can be as much as sevenfold quicker than the slowest speeds, yet the differences between them almost invariably average out quite close to the suggested metronome setting. This insightful discovery contradicts critics who accused the composer of a capricious and illogical approach to performance. Even Faubion Bowers, who authored two widely read books and several articles on the composer, considered his piano roll performances "extraordinarily erratic, arhythmical, [and] nervous."[4]

Chapters three and four feature case studies of eleven works that Scriabin recorded for Welte and Hupfeld, and for each piece Leikin supplies some historical background and examines tempo flexibility, desynchronization of parts, articulation, pedaling, and score modifications. Descriptions of variances between the scores and Scriabin's performances are painstaking in detail and can make for dry reading. Pianists would best utilize these chapters as a reference guide for individual pieces, but the consistent approach Scriabin takes to such matters as rolled chords, agogic accents, and tempo variation provides a template for how to play his piano music. Another fascinating finding Leikin reveals is how Scriabin desynchronizes parts between the hands, which intensifies the sense of spontaneity and highlights the music's contrapuntal design. Here Scriabin recalled the lessons of his theory teacher Sergei Taneyev, a master contrapuntist who taught his students that rhythmic differentiation helps distinguish individual lines in polyphonic textures. Following each chapter discussion are Lobanov's transcriptions, complete with tempo graphs and comparisons between the piano-roll realizations and published scores. Readers will benefit most from these transcriptions by consulting reliable recordings of Scriabin's piano rolls, but unfortunately only the Welte sessions have

4. Bowers, *The New Scriabin*: *Enigma and Answers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 198. In an article on Scriabin's recorded legacy, John W. Clark similarly rebuked the composer's excessive rubato, "rhythmic distortion," and tendency to accelerate the tempo with every crescendo. See Clark, "Divine Mysteries: On Some Skriabin Recordings," *19th-Century Music* 6, no. 3 (1983): 264–68.

been released on CD.[5] Points of interest on the piano rolls include the omission of long slurs in favor of two- or four-bar phrase articulations reminiscent of eighteenth-century practices, partial and long-held pedaling that allow chromatic notes to blur together in a haze of dissonance, and score alterations such as in the Mazurka op. 40, no. 2 (which the composer recorded for both Hupfeld and Welte), where eight bars are omitted from the 1910 Welte recording, thus altering the form from a ternary to a rounded binary design. (Leikin suggests that Scriabin probably made the same cut in 1908, but that Hupfeld engineers likely copied these bars from elsewhere in the roll and inserted them into the missing section). The upshot of this discussion is that Scriabin played pieces differently each time in order for them to "spring to life" (p. 279), and this distinctive approach encouraged reports that his performances sounded like improvisations.

Leikin's final chapter, "Some Thoughts on Scriabin and Romantic Performing Traditions," emphasizes how the composer's tendency to desynchronize his hands, constantly vary the tempo, and freely roll chords is "incompatible with modern playing" (p. 273), yet were considered accepted standards of early twentieth-century performance practice. He blames classical music critics, conservatories, and piano competitions for encouraging modern pianists' "surgically precise renditions of the score" (p. 282), and petitions for a "freer and more individualistic approach to the musical text" (p. 278) but cautions that interpretive decisions should reflect the musical structure and convey "rhetorical sincerity" (p. 279). The author refers to this promotion of the composer's authority and creative vision over personalized interpretations as the "great freeze" (p. 282), although he never specifically mentions the modernist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. He further contends that tempo fluctuation was hardly unique to pianists trained in the Russian Romantic tradition and cites the example of Catalan composer-pianist Enrique Granados (1867-1916). It seems odd that Leikin establishes such a rich context for Scriabinian performance practices over the course of an entire book, only to balk at discussing any twentieth-century pianists who possessed the interpretive ingenuity and formidable technique needed to play Scriabin's music effectively, including Vladimir Sofronitsky, Sviatoslav Richter, Vladimir Horowitz, Anton Kuerti, Hilde Somer, and Ruth Laredo, to name a few, but considering that Leikin published an earlier article on Granados, it must have been a subject closer to his area of expertise.[6] To his credit, Leikin includes some fascinating anecdotes about Russian pianist and famed Scriabin interpreter Vsevolod Buyukli (1873-1920), who premiered the composer's Third Piano Sonata in Moscow in 1900, but in light of the availability and wealth of exceptional record-

5. Highly recommended is the 2003 release by the Pierian Recording Society, *Alexander Scriabin: The Composer as Pianist* (Pierian 0018), which includes nine works played by the composer in addition to performances of Scriabin's music by Josef Lhevinne, Constantine Igumnoff, Alexander Goldenweiser, Austin Conradi, Leff Pouishnoff, and Magdeleine Brard. An equally viable option is the 1997 release on the Saison Russe label, *Scriabin and the Scriabinians* (RUS 788032), which features performances by Scriabin, Alexander Goldenweiser, Samuel Feinberg, Heinrich Neuhaus, and Vladimir Sofronitsky.

6. Leikin, "Piano-Roll Recordings of Enrique Granados: A Study of a Transcription of the Composer's Performance," *The Journal of Musicological Research* 21, nos. 1-2 (2002): 3–19.

ings of Scriabin's works, an informed discussion of how latter-day pianists preserved past performance traditions vital to Scriabin's solo piano music would have supplied a more satisfying and logical conclusion to his book.

Overall this book is an important contribution to the literature on Scriabin and is written in an accessible style that will appeal to music professionals and laypersons alike. Especially noteworthy are the handsomely typeset musical examples and Leikin's frequent consultation of Russian sources not cited elsewhere in English language publications on Scriabin. The text is relatively free of typographical errors (most are in the footnotes) and includes a modest bibliography and index. Perusing this book gives readers the assurance that Leikin has thoroughly absorbed Scriabin's music through countless hours at the keyboard, and his keen familiarity with its formal structures and pianistic challenges lend his writing a tone of authority. He does not simply take inventory of Scriabin's performance decisions but provides a rationale for why they make sense musically, and his earnest appeal for pianists to overcome their fears of projecting their own personalities in performance is commendable and will hopefully be heeded by the next generation of Scriabin-playing pianists.