2018

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Recommended Citation

Leikin, Anatole (2018) "Not Set in Stone: Mikhail Pletnev's Rewrite of Scriabin's Piano Concerto," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 22: No. 1, Article 4. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.201722.01.04
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol22/iss1/4>

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Not Set in Stone: Mikhail Pletnev's Rewrite of Scriabin's Piano Concerto

Anatole Leikin

Alexander Scriabin's Piano Concerto in F-sharp Minor, Op. 20 (1897), has a rather peculiar history. Its inception and early performances were beset by problems. The initial versions of the score, as well as first public performances, were met with harsh criticisms. Then, in 1899, the critics' and the public's reaction suddenly went from disparaging to admiring. Subsequently, Scriabin's own performances of the Concerto continued to consistently gather highest accolades throughout Russia, Western Europe, and the US. After the composer's death in 1915, however, the Concerto has gradually faded into virtual obscurity. This article will examine circumstances surrounding the history of the Concerto, Scriabin's interpretive approach to his published scores, and a recent endeavor by Mikhail Pletnev to revise and revive the Concerto in accordance with Scriabin's performance practice principles.

The inauspicious beginnings

Scriabin first mentioned that he had begun working on the Concerto in his letter of 15 [27] October 1896¹ to Mitrofan Belyaev, his publisher at the time.² Apparently, Scriabin was working so precipitously that, within five days, he had already started the third movement. Less than a month later, on 12 [24] November, the composer reported to Belyaev that he had completed the Concerto, had played it on two pianos in the house of Vasily Safonov (Scriabin's former professor at the Moscow Conservatory), and was now busy orchestrating the work.

1. Mitrofan Petrovich Belyaev (1836-1904) was a figure of colossal importance in the development of Russian music. A rich timber merchant and an amateur musician, Belyaev became one of the leading philanthropists in Russia, supporting and promoting Russian composers. He organized a society of Russian musicians, the so-called Belyaev circle, which met in St. Petersburg and included Rimsky-Korsakov, Lyadov, and Glazunov. Belyaev also founded his own music publishing house based in Leipzig that was dedicated to publishing Russian composers.

2. A. N. Scriabin, *Pis'ma*, ed. A. V. Kashperov (Moscow: Muzyka, 2003), 155. Here and in the following references to Scriabin's letters the original dates are given according to the Julian calendar, which was used in Russia at the time. The dates of the Western Gregorian calendar are added in brackets.

While both the solo and the first rough draft of the orchestra accompaniment were completed with astonishing speed, Scriabin continued to labor over the orchestration, trying to overcome several disheartening setbacks. On several occasions, Scriabin assured Belyaev that he had finished the Concerto, only to go back and revise the orchestration again.³

Thus, in his letter to Belyaev of 26 March [7 April] 1897, the composer informed the publisher that he had completed the Concerto and was about to deliver the score. Then, two weeks later, 10 [22] April 1897, Scriabin wrote again to Belyaev indicating that the first movement, presumably completed two weeks earlier, would once more be ready the following day.⁴

The reason for this new delay was that Belyaev, as was customary in his publishing house, asked Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Anatoly Lyadov to review the score before its publication. Scriabin, having become concerned before hearing from the elder composers, went back and revised the work.

After these two intervening weeks, Scriabin received a letter from Rimsky-Korsakov in which that renowned composer excoriated the latest version of the first movement of the Concerto for both the careless notation and the orchestration flaws (this scathing letter has not survived; Scriabin did not even show it to his wife).⁵ On 19 April [1 May] Scriabin responded to Rimsky-Korsakov:

Your letter threw me into depths of depression. And I can say nothing in my defense except mentioning a minor circumstance preventing me from concentrating on anything in general and on writing a score in particular—it is a neuralgia that has lasted for several days already. I am so humiliated! I am going to do everything I possibly can in order to correct the following movements, even though I am so ashamed that I would like to ask you not to trouble yourself and not to bestow upon me your attention and graciousness, which I absolutely do not deserve. If, however, you would be so kind as to not to grant this request, I would be eternally grateful and will make every effort to eradicate my carelessness.⁶

3. A. N. Scriabin, *Pis'ma*, 161, 163-65, 167-73.

4. Scriabin, 167-68.

5. Fabian Bowers, *Scriabin* (2nd, revised edition. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1996), vol. 1, 234-35.

6. Scriabin, 168-69.

On the same day, Scriabin wrote to Lyadov, whose comments about the first movement were apparently more positive than those of Rimsky-Korsakov, and with whom Scriabin was on much friendlier terms:⁷

I am writing these few lines of gratitude under a very unpleasant condition under which I find myself during the last few days. Because of my neuralgia, everything seems to be in the gloomiest colors. I feel very ashamed in front of Nicolai Andreyevich [Rimsky-Korsakov], but what can I do with myself? I'll try to be more accurate.⁸

Scriabin's good intentions did not materialize. He mixed up the envelopes and sent Lyadov's letter to Rimsky-Korsakov and vice versa. Rimsky-Korsakov was so incensed that he walked into Belyaev's office, tossed Lyadov's misaddressed letter on the publisher's desk, and stormed out without saying a word. Belyaev wrote immediately to Scriabin that his absent-mindedness and carelessness were "simply phenomenal . . . Where was your head?!"⁹

When Rimsky-Korsakov later received Scriabin's manuscript of the remaining two movements of the Concerto, his assessment of the orchestra part in these movements was even more negative than his earlier castigation of the first movement. In utter frustration, Rimsky-Korsakov sent the score to Lyadov, writing on the score's cover, "Dear Anatoly, look at this filth; I already have. There is much I don't understand, and I simply give up. I am in no condition to nurse this feeble-minded genius. Let the author publish this Concerto for two pianos, and then have someone else orchestrate it."¹⁰

Nonetheless, Belyaev pressed on with the publication of the entire score. He did, however, send the manuscript first to a highly experienced music copyist, Vasily Stolz, who meticulously corrected the score, compiling three pages of notational errors.¹¹

7. Scriabin addresses Lyadov by using the familiar *ty*, which is a Russian equivalent of *tu* in French or *du* in German.

8. Scriabin, *Pis'ma*, 169.

9. Fabion Bowers, *Scriabin* (2nd, revised edition. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 234–35.

10. Scriabin, 173.

11. *Ibid.*, 237.

While the score of the Concerto was being prepared for publication, Scriabin premiered the Concerto in Odessa in October of 1897, with Vasily Safonov conducting. During rehearsals, Scriabin made several changes in the orchestration (four bars in the finale and a few minor corrections elsewhere) and sent the modifications to Belyaev to be incorporated into the soon-to-be-published score.¹²

Yet Scriabin's woes with the Concerto persisted. The reception of the piece in Odessa was lukewarm (although Safonov declared the performance a success). While the local press remained reservedly polite, the consensus was that the orchestra, rather than the piano, played the main role.¹³

The St. Petersburg performance of the Concerto a year later, on 28 November 1898, received much more disparaging reviews in the press. Nikolai Findeizen wrote in *Russkaya muzykal'naya gazeta* (*The Russian Musical Gazette*) that one could not hear the piano part in its struggle with the orchestral accompaniment; the piano was "completely drowning in the orchestra like in a swamp," wrote Findeizen.¹⁴ This criticism was especially distressing to Scriabin, as Findeizen was not merely a newspaper critic. Rather, he was one of Russia's leading music historians and had, in 1894, founded *The Russian Musical Gazette*. In the wake of this criticism, the discouraged Scriabin cancelled the upcoming St. Petersburg performance of the Concerto, originally scheduled to take place a few days later.

The turnabout

Then something happened that drastically changed the public reception of the Concerto. A few months after the berated St. Petersburg performance, in March of 1899, Scriabin played the Concerto in Moscow, and critics raved about it. Yuly Engel, writing for the *Russian Gazette*, praised both the piano part (especially in the last movement) and the "continually interesting orchestration, written by a master."¹⁵ Prince Sergei Trubetskoy, a music critic for the *Courier*, complimented the unusual filigree and pianistic intricacy of the solo part, as well as the overall originality of Scriabin's musical style.

12. Scriabin, 183. The composer, unfortunately, did not specify the exact places in which he changed the orchestration.

13. Bowers, 244.

14. Scriabin, 208.

15. Ibid., 211; Bowers, 260

Prior complaints about a lack of balance between the piano and orchestra were not even mentioned.¹⁶

Such a disparity of opinions could not be blamed on a possible animus on the part of the St. Petersburg listeners and critics toward the Muscovite composer. Scriabin later played many concerts in St. Petersburg (including performances of the Concerto in 1911 and 1913), all to great accolades.¹⁷ The reason for such a remarkable metamorphosis in public reception has to be found elsewhere.

In 1908, after a hiatus, Scriabin resumed performing the Concerto, presenting it in various Russian cities as well as in Cincinnati, New York City, The Hague, Amsterdam, Frankfurt-am-Main, and London. The press reviews were glowing. After a concert in Cincinnati with Frank Van der Stucken conducting, the critic John A. Homan marveled at the quality of Scriabin's performance after only one rehearsal with the orchestra, stating that "in the extraordinarily difficult third movement the performer was remarkably successful in combining a powerful style with incomparable delicacy. In the fortissimo passages," continued Homan, "Scriabin displayed a bravura commensurate with the heft of the orchestral accompaniment."¹⁸

Did Scriabin revise the Concerto after its St. Petersburg fiasco in 1898, turning it into a successful piece? If so, he did not introduce any modifications into the score, which had been originally published in 1898 and has since been reprinted with no changes. Furthermore, as far as we know, the orchestra part did not undergo any alterations, except, perhaps, for Scriabin's possible verbal instructions to the conductors. All the concert performances, involving different orchestras, were apparently conducted from the printed orchestral scores, since we do not have any evidence to the contrary. (Incidentally, Scriabin in the end ignored most of Rimsky-Korsakov's criticisms, and the published orchestral accompaniment, with the exception of numerous spelling errors, remained largely the same as in the severely maligned manuscript.)

The probable revisions could only involve the solo part in Scriabin's own performances. When other pianists, who obviously used the published score, performed the Concerto, it was still met with disapproval. Thus, after the superb pianist Konstantin Igumnov played the Concerto in Moscow in 1904, Sergey Taneyev wrote in his diary that the Concerto left a vague impression; there were not enough contrasts, he thought; the

16. Scriabin, 211.

17. Scriabin, 583 and 602.

18. *The Musical Courier*, No. 3 (1907): 30, quoted in Scriabin, *Pis'ma*, 460.

piano part was often (and unnecessarily) doubled by the orchestra; and the bass notes were often too long, sapping the music of energy and rendering it sluggish.¹⁹

The press reviews of Igumnov's performance of the Concerto were just as censorious. Ivan Lipaev wrote in *Russkaya muzykal'naya gazeta* (The Russian Musical Gazette) that the Concerto was "boring and monotonous." Semyon Kruglikov in *Novosti dnya* (The Daily News), reviewing the same performance, wrote that the Concerto was "inarticulate." In fact, he did not hear "anything praiseworthy, either in the solo part or in the orchestral accompaniment."²⁰

The solo part of the Concerto's printed score indeed leaves plenty of room for criticism. Written in a hurry by the young composer, it is notoriously difficult, uncomfortable, and, in some places, nearly unplayable. Widely spaced chords and oddly shaped arpeggios require huge hands that Scriabin himself did not even have: A frail, diminutive man, standing just one inch over five feet, he could hardly play intervals wider than an octave. The unnecessary doublings of the piano part by the orchestra and the thinly spread chords make the piano barely audible in performance.

The question is: What could Scriabin have changed in the piano part of the Concerto following its abysmal debut in Odessa and the first concert in St. Petersburg that transformed the public's and critics' responses from unflattering to admiring? There is no extant documentary evidence; no score corrections or revisions have come to light, which is not at all surprising, since Scriabin never revised his piano scores on paper.

Records show, nevertheless, that Scriabin did alter the music, but only in his performances. When musicians attended Scriabin's piano concerts with scores in hand, they noticed that the composer *always* strayed from the published score, and that his changes *always* sounded better than the printed text.²¹ Unfortunately, we don't know if any of the listeners marked their personal scores during Scriabin's performances, and if they did, the existence of those marked scores is unknown.

In the absence of documented evidence for the changes in these performances, then, one must investigate more generally the manner in which Scriabin altered his music in performance. One helpful source for this investigation is the composer's piano-roll recordings, which may be compared with the published scores. From these, one may

19. Scriabin, 174.

20. Scriabin., 320–21.

21. Arnold Alshvang, "Zhizn' i tvorchestvo A. N. Skryabina" [The Life and Creative Work of A. N. Scriabin], in *A. N. Scriabin*, ed. S. Pavchinsky (Moscow: Sovetsky Kompozitor, 1973), 93.

formulate certain principles, and then apply these principles to the compositions which Scriabin did not record.²²

Scriabin made nineteen recordings of his works for the German firms of Hupfeld and Welte, German player pianos, in 1908 and 1910, respectively. In total, he recorded fourteen compositions for the Hupfeld Phonola and nine for the Welte-Mignon (four pieces were duplicated in both recordings).²³

To be sure, early piano-roll recordings were far from perfect. Expression and pedaling were approximate at best, and pianistic touch was nonexistent. Still, pitches, rhythms, tempos, articulation, and alignment of notes against each other were reproduced faithfully enough (although Hupfeld did edit out occasional wrong notes) to offer a fairly detailed picture of Scriabin's alterations of his music.²⁴

Scriabin's nine Welte-Mignon rolls have since been acoustically recorded and commercially released on LPs and CDs; the Phonola rolls have only been recorded privately and are not widely available.²⁵ Scriabin's recordings have also been transcribed directly from the piano rolls and presented as music scores. While the playback has the advantage of a direct auditory impression, score transcriptions of Scriabin's Phonola and Welte-Mignon recordings present his recordings in an accessible format, which makes it much easier for a musician to analyze Scriabin's performances and play them on the piano.²⁶

22. In the early twentieth century, player pianos were a widespread form of home entertainment. Piano rolls, which were perforated paper rolls, were inserted into player pianos and driven from one spool onto another. The paper perforations set in motion a highly complicated bellows system, which, in turn, activated the piano hammers. The piano-roll repertoire ranged from dance music and popular tunes to sophisticated concert piano pieces. At first, piano rolls were manufactured at the piano-roll factories, where technicians perforated paper rolls according to music scores. Then, in 1904, recording machines were invented, which allowed prominent pianists and composers to record concert pieces. A pianist would play on a piano connected to a recording device; the recording machine created a master roll, which was duplicated at a factory, after which piano-roll copies were sold to consumers.

23. I listed a complete inventory of Scriabin's piano-roll recordings in Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011) 8, 11.

24. See a detailed discussion of the recoding and playback capabilities of the Hupfeld Phonola and the Welte-Mignon in Leikin, 6–18.

25. I highly recommend Scriabin's Welte recordings released by the Pierian Records in 2004 (PIR0018). I am also grateful to Rex Lawson for letting me hear some of his masterful Pianola renditions of Scriabin's Phonola rolls.

26. For complete transcriptions of Scriabin's recordings see Leikin, 77–272.

Scriabin's alterations of his own works

As the transcriptions of Scriabin's recordings demonstrate, he often revoiced harmonies, reshuffled notes in accompanimental broken chords, removed and added non-melodic notes, and, occasionally, made sizable cuts in the printed texts. In all technically demanding compositions that he recorded—as, for example, his Etude Op. 8, No. 12, and the Sonatas Op. 19 and Op. 23—the texture is simplified in performance, and not only because it has fewer notes than are written in the score. Many chords, arpeggios, and wide leaps are rearranged to make them considerably easier to play, although for the listener the overall impression remains virtually the same. Here are just a few examples of the ways in which Scriabin changed the printed texts in performance.

In the first movement of Sonata Op. 19, Scriabin frequently modifies awkward hand stretches. Thus, in m. 17 of the published score (Example 1), the second and the third groups of eighths in LH extend for an eleventh and a twelfth, respectively.²⁷ In his recorded performance, however, Scriabin reduces the span of each triplet down to an octave, putting it within an easy reach of a hand position.

Example 1. Scriabin, Sonata No. 2 in G# Minor, op. 19, movt. I, mm. 16–17.

The image displays two musical staves for comparison. The upper staff is titled 'Scriabin's recording' and the lower staff is titled 'Published score'. Both staves are in G# minor (three sharps) and show measures 16 and 17. The left hand (LH) is the primary focus. In the published score, the LH has two groups of eighth notes with spans of an eleventh and a twelfth. In the recording, these are simplified to an octave span. Both staves have a 'Ped.' (pedal) marking at the start of measure 17 and an asterisk at the end of the measure.

27. Leikin, 38–39, 158, 171. In Examples 1–3, the lower grand staff represents the printed score and the upper grand staff is a transcription of Scriabin's recording. The abbreviations LH and RH stand for "left hand" and "right hand."

Example 3a. Scriabin, Sonata No. 3 in F# Minor, op. 23, movt. IV, mm. 6–8.

Scriabin's recording

Published score

In Example 3b, Scriabin the pianist keeps the sixteenths that Scriabin the composer wrote (albeit on a different beat in m. 12), but he drops the lowest note on the downbeat of m. 12 and narrows the range of almost all the arpeggios except for the one on the downbeat of m. 11.²⁹

Example 3b. Scriabin, Sonata No. 3 in F# Minor, op. 23, movt IV, mm. 11–12

Scriabin's recording

Published score

29. Leikin, 141, 149, 187, 247–48.

It is, therefore, entirely reasonable to assume that Scriabin altered—and improved—the piano part of the Concerto in his performances, just as he did habitually in his other works. In fact, no evidence exists that Scriabin ever performed his music strictly by the score, while proofs of the contrary are plentiful.

Regrettably, Scriabin did not record the Concerto, so we will never know exactly how he changed the piano part to overcome apparent shortcomings in the published score. As a result, we face a quandary: What is a pianist supposed to do when he or she performs the Concerto?

To be sure, one can faithfully adhere to the published score, as practically all pianists after Scriabin have done—although, as history shows, playing the Concerto in full accordance with the score quite possibly renders a disservice to this music. Indeed, after Scriabin's death in 1915, the Concerto rapidly lost its popularity. Lincoln Ballard asserts that “by mid-century, the Concerto was tossed into cold storage and forgotten.”³⁰

Within the last twenty-five years, however, a few pianists—all of them ardent Scriabin enthusiasts—have recorded the piece and brought it back into concert halls: Nikolai Demidenko, Garrick Ohlsson, Konstantin Scherbakov, Evgeny Kissin, and Yevgeny Sudbin.³¹ But despite the efforts of these excellent performers, the interest in Scriabin's Concerto has remained low overall. Sudbin, in an interview videotaped before he played the Concerto in Bournemouth in 2016, characterized the piece as “one of the most underrated Concertos” and lamented “not many people perform this Concerto, for some reason.”³²

The critical reception of the Concerto has also remained rather mixed in recent years. Stephen Greenbank, in his review of Sudbin's recording, praises the Concerto as “melodious,” adding that he cannot understand why this Concerto “is not taken up by more pianists.”³³

30. Lincoln Ballard, “Symphonies and Orchestral Works,” in *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore*, eds. Lincoln Ballard and Matthew Bengston (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 80.

31. The modern recording pianists include Nikolai Demidenko (Hyperion Records, 1994, Alsexander Lazarev conducting), Garrick Ohlsson (Supraphon, 1996, Libor Pesek conducting), Konstantin Scherbakov (Naxos, 1999, Igor Golovshin conducting), and Yevgeny Sudbin (BIS Records, 2014, Andrew Litton conducting). Evgeny Kissin performed the Concerto with the NY Philharmonic in 2012, with Alan Gilbert conducting, but has not recorded the piece.

32. Posted on “Scriabin: Piano Concerto – Yevgeny Sudbin with Bournemouth Orchestra,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgH9BpCfxu0>, last accessed on 28 October, 2017.

33. http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2015/Feb/Medtner_Scriabin_PC_BIS2088.htm

Other critics have not been as charitable. David Hurwitz, in his review of Scherbakov's disc, mentions "the loose architecture of the outer movements,"³⁴ while Harriet Smith, reviewing Sudbin's recording, opines regarding "the arguably over-extended finale."³⁵ David C F Wright issued perhaps the strongest condemnation of the piece in his review of Scherbakov's CD: "This is the worst piano concerto I know although it is not the only one. It is dull, uneventful, note spinning and often sounds like Chopin in its nauseous effeminacy and tinkly music... There are very many concert pianists who will not play this concerto as it is so awful."³⁶

Apparently, faithfully following the score has not revived the Concerto's former glory from the days of Scriabin's own performances. A possible way out of this predicament may be to move away from the printed score and to emulate the composer's playing. One could scrutinize Scriabin's recordings of his other compositions (by either listening to his piano-roll recordings, or playing transcriptions thereof, or both), arrive at certain conclusions regarding Scriabin's score modifications, and then modify the solo part of the Concerto accordingly.

One performer who has undertaken this project of revision is the pianist, conductor, and composer Mikhail Pletnev.³⁷

Mikhail Pletnev's alterations of Scriabin's score

In the spirit of Scriabin's approach to his own scores, Pletnev has recently revised—and, in many instances, practically rewritten—the piano part of the Concerto. The score of Pletnev's revision of Scriabin's Concerto has not yet been published. He,

34. <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-3822/>

35. <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/medtner-piano-concerto-no-3-scriabin-piano-concerto>

36. <http://www.wrightmusic.net/pages/cd-reviews.html>

37. Mikhail Pletnev (b. 1957) received international recognition after winning the Gold Medal at the VI International Tchaikovsky Competition at the age of 21. Since then he has concertized in Europe, Asia, and the US, recorded on several labels (including Virgin-Classical and Deutsche Grammophon), and won Grammy, Gramophone, and Tokyo Record Academy Awards.

In 1990, he founded the first independent orchestra in Russian history, the Russian National Orchestra, which he continues directing today. As a guest conductor, Pletnev has appeared with such ensembles as London's Philharmonia Orchestra, Tokyo Philharmonic, Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, and Los Angeles Philharmonic.

however, now performs his version of the Concerto across Europe as well as in Asia, playing it in concerts with various orchestras.³⁸

Since it is not readily available at this time, I have selected several representative musical examples from the unpublished piano score that I received from Pletnev in 2014. The reader can then reasonably extrapolate Pletnev's solutions onto the entire Concerto.

Pletnev's revisions achieve two main goals. They make the solo part more pianistic, more comfortable to play; at the same time, the piano part becomes more powerful, reaching a far better balance in relation to the orchestra. The alterations range from simple editorial fingering annotations, to rearranged, removed or added notes, to a sizeable score cut in the third movement.

In his version, Pletnev often omits notes, usually in widely spaced chords that place an unnecessary strain on the hands, just as Scriabin himself did in his recordings. Pletnev also regularly contracts excessive leaps, making them more manageable for a performer. In Example 4, the sighing countermelody on the second and third eighth notes of every triplet (G—F-sharp, F-sharp—B, E-sharp—F-sharp) sounds unnecessarily heavy, being replicated in three registers. Pletnev abolishes octaves in LH on the second and third eighths of every beat, drastically reducing the troublesome leaps in LH and, at the same time, making the countermelody sound more nimble and timbrally poignant by voicing it at two octaves apart.³⁹

(continued on next page)

38. Pletnev premiered his version of the Concerto in Moscow on 22 September 2015. Since then, he has performed the Concerto in other cities as well, including Tokyo, Paris, Baden-Baden, and Florence. Recordings of these concerts, unfortunately, are not available to the public.

39. In Examples 4–11, the lower system represents the published score of Scriabin's Concerto (with a reduction of the orchestra part at the bottom), while the upper grand staff shows corresponding excerpts from Pletnev's revision.

Example 4. Scriabin, Piano Concerto in F# Minor, op. 20, movt. I, m. 142.

Pletnev's version

Published score

When the piano does not compete with the orchestra, many octaves are reduced to single notes in order to enhance the atmosphere of precipitous flight, which is so vital for Scriabin's music. In Example 5, Pletnev omits the RH D-sharp on the downbeat, as well as the LH octave D-sharp on beat 4. He also divides between the two hands the repeated LH octaves, B – A-sharp on beats 1–3, simplifying the execution of this passage.

Example 5. Scriabin, Piano Concerto in F# Minor, op. 20, movt. II, m. 35.

Pletnev's version

Published score

The image displays two musical staves for comparison. The top staff, labeled 'Pletnev's version', shows a melodic line in the treble clef with eighth and sixteenth notes, and a bass line in the bass clef. The bottom staff, labeled 'Published score', shows a different melodic line in the treble clef and a more complex bass line with chords and rests. Both staves are in F# minor (three sharps) and 2/4 time. A dynamic marking 'f' is present in both versions.

In many cases, Pletnev eliminates superfluous piano doublings of the orchestra part. Thus, in Example 6, the LH replication of the strings on the downbeat is omitted in Pletnev's version, and on beats 2–3 the LH part becomes lighter, less plodding.

(continued on next page)

Example 6. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, op. 20, movt. III, m. 279 (m. 245 in Pletnev's version).

Pletnev's version

245

Published score

cresc.

In Example 7, while avoiding strenuous hand stretches in LH chords, Pletnev energizes the solo part with a more powerful bass (m. 144, beat 3), reinforces the melody by adding lower octaves in m. 145, and eliminates most of the chords which duplicate the orchestra (m. 145).

(continued on next page)

Example 7. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. I, mm. 144–45.

The image displays a comparison of two musical scores for measures 144 and 145 of Scriabin's Piano Concerto, movement I. The top system, labeled 'Pletnev's version', shows measures 144 and 145 with a treble and bass staff. The bottom system, labeled 'Published score', shows the same measures with a treble and bass staff. The published score includes a third staff for the right hand (RH) in measure 145, which is not present in Pletnev's version. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4.

At the same time, aiming at a better balance between the piano and the orchestral *tutti*, Pletnev increases the prominence of the solo part by rearranging chords so that they become more compact, sonorous, and therefore more powerful than in the original score (see Example 8, mm. 143–50). Pletnev also adds extra notes to Scriabin's repeated RH octaves on every last two sixteenths in mm. 143–44 (Example 8).

Furthermore, Pletnev makes the forceful torrents of chords in mm. 143–6 far more approachable pianistically. In the original score, a pianist has to change largely extended hand positions every two sixteenths; in Pletnev's version, after the repeated LH octaves on the downbeat of every bar, hand positions shift every four rather than every two sixteenth notes, and with only intermittent octave stretches in the RH (see mm. 143–46 in Example 8).

Example 8a. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, op. 20, movt. III, m. 143.

Pletnev's version

143 *Maestoso*

ff

6

8^{va}

Published score

Maestoso

ff

8^{va}

Maestoso

ff

(*loco*)

3

3

12

(continued on next page)

Example 8b. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt III, mm. 144-145.

The image displays a comparison of two musical versions of Scriabin's Piano Concerto, movement III, measures 144-145. The first system, labeled "Pletnev's version", shows measures 144 and 145. The second system, labeled "Published score", shows the same measures with a different arrangement of notes and fingerings. The third system shows measures 146 and 147. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and fingerings.

Example 8c. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. III, mm. 146-147.

The image displays two musical scores for a piano piece. The top score is labeled "Pletnev's version" and the bottom score is labeled "Published score". Both are in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The top score includes a tempo marking of 146 and a page number of 9. The bottom score includes a tempo marking of 146 and a page number of 24. The top score features a complex, fast-paced melody with many triplets and sixteenth notes, while the bottom score is more melodic and features a prominent bass line with a 7-measure rest. The top score also includes a section with a 3-measure rest and a 3-measure rest, and a section with a 3-measure rest and a 3-measure rest.

Example 8d. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. III, mm. 148–50.

Pletnev's version

Published score

Pletnev's version

Published score

Pletnev's amendments to the piano texture closely resemble Scriabin's simplifications of accompanimental arpeggios (see Examples 3a, b). These resourceful score modifications by Scriabin and Pletnev facilitate performance without compromising the outcome: Both the originals and the revised versions sound essentially the same, except that the revisions are more playable than the ungainly originals. In Example 9, the most

sweeping changes involve a considerable (but barely audible) simplification of the LH part. It has far fewer notes than the published score, and the cumbersome hand stretches are substantially reduced. The only modifications in the RH part are an added B on the last beat of m. 174, two eighth notes on the downbeat of m. 175, F-sharp – E-sharp, which Pletnev moved an octave up from LH to RH, and an omitted A at the end of the downbeat in m. 178 (see Example 9).

Example 9a. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. III, mm. 174–76.

Pletnev's version

Published score

(continued on next page)

Example 9b. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. III, mm. 177-180.

Pletnev's version

Published score

Pletnev's version

Published score

The image displays a comparison between Pletnev's version and the published score for measures 177-180 of Scriabin's Piano Concerto, movement III. The notation is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The first system (measures 177-180) shows Pletnev's version with triplets in the right hand and quintuplets in the left hand. The published score for the same measures includes a *dim.* marking in the right hand. The second system (measures 179-180) shows Pletnev's version with a *pp* marking and a triplet in the right hand. The published score for the same measures includes a *pp* marking and a triplet in the right hand, and a *f* marking and a triplet in the left hand.

Example 9c. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. III, mm. 181–82.

Pletnev's version

Published score

One of the cornerstones of Pletnev's formidable piano technique is that he shuns, as much as possible, situations in which the fingers are stretched out, reaching for keys. Instead, no matter how devilishly difficult a piece is, his hands move across the keyboard in such a way that each finger is inevitably positioned directly above the key it needs to play. As a result, his relatively small hands look entirely at ease, without any trace of strain.

To accomplish this goal and to avoid awkward hand extensions, Pletnev often does not even change the original notes. Instead, he introduces some clever editing. Every now and then Pletnev either alters or adds slurs to indicate hand positions. He also occasionally supplies his own fingerings, which achieves the same objective (see LH slurs in mm. 3–4 of Example 10 and mm. 91–92 of Example 11, as well as added fingerings in m. 2 of Example 10). Many highly challenging, rapid one-hand passages instantly become much easier to execute when Pletnev divides them between the two hands (see Example 9, m. 182, and Example 10, mm. 4 and 8).

Example 10a. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. III, mm. 1–5.

Pletnev's version 15

Published score

Pletnev's version

Published score

Example 10b. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. III, mm. 6-8.

The image displays a musical score for Example 10b, comparing Pletnev's version and the published score for Scriabin's Piano Concerto, movement III, measures 6-8. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The top system shows measures 6-8 with Pletnev's version in the upper staves and the published score in the lower staves. The bottom system shows measures 9-10. Pletnev's version includes a forte (f) dynamic and a slur over measures 6-8. The published score includes a forte (f) dynamic and a slur over measures 6-8. The bottom system shows a piano part with a forte-piano (fp) dynamic and a slur over measures 9-10.

Rarely does Pletnev alter Scriabin's score beyond rearranging, omitting, or adding notes, but it does happen occasionally. In the published score in Example 11, both RH and LH in the piano part double the first violins and the clarinets on every beat of m. 90 (B – A-sharp – G-sharp – A-sharp), while the violas and the first bassoon play a countermelody. Pletnev keeps the upper melodic line in RH unchanged except for the slurring, but the LH part at first buttresses the countermelody on the first three beats of m. 90 (G-sharp – A-sharp – B). Then the dominant seventh (B) appears on the last beat of m. 90 in LH, which is absent in Scriabin's original (Example 11, m. 90, below).

(continued on next page)

Example 11. Scriabin, Piano Concerto, movt. II, mm. 90–92.

Pletnev's version

90

Published score

90

Pletnev's version

92

Published score

92

The most radical departure from the original text is a cut in the last movement (“the arguably over-extended finale”), where Pletnev skips mm. 240–72 of the published score. This cut is analogous to Scriabin’s own performing cuts in his Mazurka Op. 40 No. 2, Sonata Op. 19, and Sonata Op. 23.⁴⁰ In a private conversation in 2014, Pletnev explained that the removal of mm. 240–72 in the finale eliminated some redundancies in the recapitulation of the finale.

Conclusion

The limited popularity of Scriabin’s Concerto today can hardly be blamed on its music, which is enticingly poetic and filled with exquisite musical ideas. The reasons for the Concerto’s undeserved obscurity are, instead, peripheral: The lack of balance between the piano and the orchestra, and the unwieldy solo part, which looks much more difficult on paper than it actually sounds.

Scriabin’s classmate Sergei Rachmaninov composed his First Piano Concerto in 1891, a few years before Scriabin’s Concerto. Both Concertos, incidentally—or, perhaps, not so incidentally—are in the key of F-sharp minor. Rachmaninov later felt that his youthful work needed an extensive revision. In 1917, the composer rewrote his First Concerto. Rachmaninov also drastically revised his Second Piano Sonata, Op. 36, eighteen years after its completion, making it more concise and, at the same time, less technically taxing.

Unlike Rachmaninov, however, Scriabin never came up with a rewritten score of the Concerto. As his piano-roll recordings amply demonstrate, Scriabin did habitually revise his compositions, but only in performance rather than in writing.

We will never know how the Concerto sounded in Scriabin’s hands. Fortunately, however, Pletnev’s revisions offer a viable alternative. In its new manifestation, the piano part of the Concerto has acquired more brilliance and power, rising above the orchestra rather than being drowned by it. Additionally, Pletnev’s rewrite of the solo part proffers an invaluable extra benefit: It is far more pianistic, much more playable than the original score.

Mikhail Pletnev’s recent, highly successful performances of his version of Scriabin’s Piano Concerto prove that his revision of this captivating work adds a new chapter to the history of Scriabin’s Concerto and may well revive its former popularity.

38. Leikin, 73, 141, and 145.

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