

"The Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore," by Lincoln Ballard and Matthew Bengtson

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Book review: Ballard, Lincoln, Matthew Bengtson. *The Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-4422-3261-7.

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The music of Alexander Scriabin has a peculiar history. While his works have continued to be performed in Russia with almost no interruptions, his compositions nearly disappeared from public view in the West for the majority of the twentieth century after the composer's demise in 1915. Vladimir Horowitz was one of very few musicians who persistently, if infrequently, performed and recorded Scriabin's music outside Russia.

Currently, however, there is a renewed interest in Scriabin's music, evident in concert programs, recordings, and scholarship. The post-Horowitz generations of pianists who either moved to the West or were born here (such as Matthew Bengtson, Nikolai Demidenko, Evgeny Kissin, Garrick Ohlsson, Mikhail Pletnev, Konstantin Scherbakov, Yevgeny Sudbin, and Yuja Wang, to name a few) now include Scriabin's works on their concert programs and, albeit less frequently, record his music. Such a growing exposure to Scriabin has not yet reached the level of popularity it enjoyed during the composer's lifetime and shortly thereafter, but we may be moving in that direction after long years of neglect.

There has likewise been an increasing number of books (or sizeable sections thereof) since the 1980s dedicated to Scriabin, authored by James Baker, Daniel Bosshard, Anatole Leikin, Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Simon Morrison, Valentina Rubtsova, Yelena Rudakova, Sigfried Schibli, Richard Taruskin, Irina Vanechkina, and Sebastian Widmaier—not to mention numerous articles and essays published in recent years on the subject.

The present book is one of the most impressive contributions to the recent homages to the Russian composer. It comprises fourteen chapters, the first of which is titled "En Garde or Avant-Garde? Exploding the Scriabin Myth." This introductory chapter, written by the late John Bell Young, lays the groundwork for the ensuing book. Young advocates a holistic approach to Scriabin's music, one that would consider the composer's mysticism—an admittedly extra-musical dimension—as an integral part of Scriabin's creative output. Young avers that Scriabin's music is



inseparable from the spiritual ideology that informs it, that there is an indissoluble relation between his music and his philosophy.

The remaining thirteen chapters are grouped into three large sections:

Part I: Encountering Scriabin

Part II: Topics in Reception History

Part III: In Performance

These chapters collectively cover a vast territory, expounding on the book's opening thesis from multiple angles and approaches: musicological, historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and hands-on practical. The resulting breadth and depth of this tome are astounding, and the best part of it is that, despite its complexity and solid scholarly grounding, the book avoids unnecessary academic jargon and is perfectly accessible to performers and music enthusiasts.

Part I, written by Lincoln Ballard, consists of Chapters 2-4: "Life, Legacy, and Music," "The Solo Piano Music," and "Symphonies and Orchestral Works." In Chapter 2, after briefly discussing stylistic influences found in Scriabin's music and his personal evolution as a composer and pianist, Ballard delves into Scriabin's musical ideology and aesthetic agenda. Ballard continues Young's assertion that Scriabin's music after 1903 is inextricably linked with his philosophical ideas. In doing so, both Young and Ballard find themselves strongly opposing the prevailing twentieth-century view that tended to dismiss Scriabin's spirituality, which was rooted in Mysticism, Russian Symbolism, and Theosophy.

Ballard addresses several issues that involve the reception of Scriabin's music and personality over the years at the end of Chapter Two. It is indeed difficult to find any other composer whose music would elicit such wild swings in public attitudes, both during his life and subsequently. Ballard describes the evolving posthumous reception of Scriabin's music from its initial adulations, which lasted only until about 1923.

In the newly formed USSR, Scriabin's music was initially denounced as decadent and "counterintuitive to proletarian ideology" (28); after the 1940s, however, his music, not his philosophy, became practically sacrosanct. In the West, opinions regarding Scriabin's music ranged from Alfred Kalisch's forecast in 1919 that "we are on the eve of a period of Scriabin worship" (29) to a *London Times* critic reporting in 1923 that "The popularity of Scriabin seems to be on the wane" because of the "real poverty of the music" (30). The formidable Gerald Abraham added in 1933 that "Scriabin is now thought very little of" (30).

The middle decades of the twentieth century, continues Ballard, "saw Scriabin's music fall into almost total neglect" (31). There was then a short revival of his music in the 1960s, when Scriabin was perceived as a "proto-Flower Child," a radical visionary who advocated musical performances accompanied by colored lights and aromas. Although this brief resurrection of Scriabin's music faded away in the 1970s, along with the Flower Power movement, it inspired music scholars to launch a new

upsurge of research on his music. Consequently, as the timeworn image of Scriabin as an irrational madcap was gradually replaced with that of an ingenious, innovative craftsman, the latest revival of his music, involving both performers and music lovers, has continued to the present day.

Chapter Three, “The Solo Piano Music,” is divided into sections on “Early Masterpieces,” “Piano Sonatas,” “Mazurkas,” “Etudes,” “Preludes,” and “Poèmes.” Ballard here offers a first-rate discussion of Scriabin’s piano compositions, which includes historical background, abundant biographical details, and analytical insights into each piece, followed by helpful lists of recommended recordings. (For some reason, though, the two delightful Mazurkas, Op. 40, are mentioned in the chapter but not analyzed.) At the end of the chapter, Ballard includes a highly informative section on pianists who have championed Scriabin’s music from the early twentieth century to the present day.

Chapter Four deals with Scriabin’s orchestral works, presented in chronological order: Piano Concerto Op. 20; *Rêverie* Op. 24; three Symphonies Opp. 26, 29, and 43 (*Le Divin Poème*), *Poème de l’Extase* Op. 54, and *Prometheus* Op. 60. As in the previous chapter, Ballard presents incisive analyses of Scriabin’s compositions and the history of their creation, and makes astute observations about the style of the music. The reader can also find a history of the performance of each work over the years, covering how a particular composition had fallen out of favor and then once more regained its popularity. Ballard concludes Chapter Four with a comprehensive review of conductors who have championed Scriabin’s music.

Part II, “Topics in Reception History,” also written by Lincoln Ballard, opens with detailed considerations of myths about Scriabin. The first step in this direction is a scrutiny of major biographies, or, as Ballard puts it, of mythmaking biographies of the composer.

The first prominent biographer of Scriabin was Leonid Sabaneev (1881-1968). A major figure in Scriabiniana, Sabaneev was the composer’s close friend and wrote several books and articles about Scriabin and his music. Ballard’s captivating narrative evaluates Sabaneev’s changing views of the composer, his personality, and music. Since Sabaneev was a key member of Scriabin’s inner circle who visited the composer almost daily during the last five years of Scriabin’s life, his personal testimony and reflections on Scriabin’s music are certainly valuable. At the same time, continues Ballard, Sabaneev put forward quite a few quasi-scientific notions for Scriabin’s harmonic vocabulary, including his since discredited idea, for example, that the overtone series was the source of Scriabin’s mystic chord (while the composer himself never thought of his famous sonority in these terms).

Another myth promulgated by Sabaneev was that Scriabin died on Easter, which numerous writers later repeated. Since Scriabin had indeed been born on Christmas Day of 1871 according to the Julian Calendar (or of 1872 according to the Gregorian one), Scriabin’s admirers took him as a new Messiah. Ballard dispels this myth,

asserting that Scriabin's death on April 27 happened more than three weeks after the Russian Orthodox Easter Sunday of 1915.

Later in life, Sabaneev renounced his previous enthusiasm for Scriabin and began to describe Scriabin's music as "hysterical and psychotic" and the composer himself as an insane, morbid megalomaniac (118-19).

Another important Scriabin biographer was Boris Schloezer (1881-1969), the composer's brother-in-[common]-law. Schloezer took offense to Sabaneev's defamatory portrayal of Scriabin, idolizing the composer and unquestionably accepting the philosophy behind Scriabin's music. Schloezer, however, overemphasized the influence of Theosophy on Scriabin and glossed over some of the "outlandish and bizarre aspects of Scriabin's personality and philosophy" (p. 121), viewing them as manifestations of Scriabin's exalted genius.

A modern-time mythmaker was Faubion Bowers (1917-1999). Thanks to his catchy, even flamboyant writings about Scriabin, which include two remarkable biographies published in 1970 (second edition: 1996) and 1974, Bowers became the leading authority on Scriabin at a time when interest in the composer—and, consequently, in Bowers' publications—was reawakening. In fact, as Ballard dryly remarks, "In Bowers' career as a writer, Scriabin became his meal ticket" (123).

While Bowers' writings on Scriabin contain veritable troves of useful information, he propagated quite a few unsupported, sensationalist allegations about the composer. Bowers claimed that Scriabin was "a neurotic whose creativity was fueled by sexual impulses" (123); that he was a borderline homosexual; that he was obsessed with numerous bizarre compulsive habits; and, of course, that he died on Easter. Ballard assures that "no evidence exists to support any of these claims" (124).

Chapter Six in Part II is dedicated to the topic of synaesthesia, or "color-hearing." Ballard analyzes a huge variety of sources, from memoirs of Scriabin's contemporaries to general psychological and physiological studies in the field of synaesthesia. He then concludes that Scriabin's color-hearing was associative rather than physiological. Unlike most synaesthetes, it thus appears that Scriabin discovered his abilities late in life rather than in his childhood. Furthermore, Scriabin insisted that a single note in itself has no color (real synaesthetes often visualize colors of single notes). Scriabin instead "felt" colors associated with large-scale key areas rather than with individual pitches. At the same time, for Scriabin, music in minor keys evoked no color association.

Ballard traces the history of performances of *Prometheus* and its orchestral part of colored lights up to the present, including the incorporation of laser lights, as reflected in numerous critical reviews and reportages. He also includes accounts of performances of Scriabin's piano music that integrated colored lights and recounts various, often conflicting, attitudes toward performances of Scriabin's music (not only *Prometheus*) with or without colored lighting.

A very important issue is the problem of Scriabin's "Russianness," which Ballard tackles in Chapter Seven. Was Scriabin "an unclassifiable Russian composer" (Donald Grout), an outsider in music history, a loner, an isolated genius? Or was he "the quintessential figure of his era" (160), and his music fully expressed the mood of his time? In musical historiography, writes Ballard, very few late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century composers "received recognition as major players in music history without being card-carrying members" (161) of a nationalist musical narrative, with folkloristic ties to certain geographical regions. Any composer who was unattached to a circle of nationalist composers was marginalized.

Scriabin was among such composers and has been routinely accused of being antinationalist, which the composer himself resented and denied. Ballard successfully argues for other strains of Russianness in Scriabin's music, such as the octatonic and whole-tone scales, as well as his evocation of bells; the sounds and imitations of bells are omnipresent in Russian music. Since musical instruments are forbidden inside Orthodox churches, much of the creative energy of Russian church musicians has been channeled toward the only instrumental accompaniment permitted for the service: the bells. The diversity of bells and bell pealing in pre-Revolutionary Russia was extraordinary; bells accompanied the lives of the Russian people on every possible occasion, both religious and secular.¹

Another significant attribute of Scriabin as a Russian composer can be seen in his close ties with the Russian Symbolist poets and painters of his time. Scriabin lived during the Russian Silver Age, which lasted roughly from 1898 to 1914. At that time, Symbolism was one of the most influential artistic movements in Russia. The Russian Symbolists strove to transform life through art, and Symbolist artists were regarded as high priests, prophets who revealed the "more real" world "that is unseen by the uninitiated" (174). Scriabin was unquestionably the most prominent musician among Russian Symbolist artists; Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), a leading Russian Symbolist poet and close friend to Scriabin, believed that "Scriabin's art defined the essence of the Russian spirit" (177).

Part III, authored by Matthew Bengtson, addresses many important issues related to the performance of Scriabin's piano music. Challenges facing performers are paramount to discussing and interpreting Scriabin's music, since his published scores inadequately represent its stylistic and expressive range. Bengtson examines in detail correlations between the printed scores of Scriabin's compositions and the composer's recorded performances with regard to rhythms, tempi, coordination between the textural layers, and pedaling.

Chapter 13 in Part III is dedicated to the "Scriabin sound." In this Chapter, Bengtson contends that Scriabin produced an incomparable sound on the piano by

1. See Anatole Leikin, "From Paganism to Orthodoxy to Theosophy: Reflections of Other Worlds in the Piano Music of Rachmaninov and Scriabin," in Siglind Brun, ed., *Voicing the Ineffable: Musical Representations of Religious Experience*. Hillsdale (NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 35-6.

combining an idiosyncratic pianistic touch and artfully using the pedal and its resonances. Vasily Safonov, Scriabin's piano professor and friend, always maintained that the less a piano sounds like a piano, the better. Scriabin mastered this approach to the instrument perfectly. Scriabin's touch, writes Bengtson, ranged from limpid caresses of the keys to incisive strikes and bell-like sounds. Scriabin's remarkable delineation of textural layers—typical of the nineteenth-century Russian piano school—his extraordinary sensitivity to the special timbral characteristics of different registers, and stunning pedal resonances all contributed to the inimitable spectrum of Scriabin's tone colors.

In Chapter Fourteen, titled "Rhythm," Bengtson describes several rhythmic patterns typical of Scriabin's style. For example, the *zov* (a call, or summons) is one of Scriabin's favorite rhythmic patterns. It is "a powerful gesture of a short note leading to an accented long one" (312). The *poriv* (flight, or impulse, or burst) is characterized by abrupt, even spasmodic gestures created by small groups of rapid notes, cut off by breathless rests. Dotted rhythms, writes Bengtson, are so critical to Scriabin's style that the composer often added dotted rhythms in his performances, even though the dots were un-notated. On page 314, Bengtson includes a table of Scriabin's characteristic rhythmic dotting (sometimes absent from the score but preserved in his piano-roll recordings).

Bengtson also examines theoretical aspects of Scriabin's music, such as voice leading, contrapuntal context, and elements of his harmonic language. Scriabin's harmony has been a fairly widespread topic in theoretical literature, but Bengtson approaches theoretical topics from a performer's perspective. I find his approach both refreshing and eminently helpful. Bengtson even offers thoughts for music teachers and intermediate pianists, with highly valuable practical suggestions for performing Scriabin's music.

Bengtson concludes Part III by asserting that Scriabin's reputation of an irrational mystic is actually balanced by a meticulous, even obsessive formal perfectionism. The fundamental challenge for the performer is to capture the excitement of Scriabin's imaginative magic without corrupting the composer's inherent musical logic and astounding craftsmanship.

There are a few misprints and oversights in the book, which in a study of such wide-ranging scope seem almost unavoidable. For example, Sabaneev's first writings on Scriabin's synaesthetic experiences appeared in 1911 in the journal *Muzyka*, which, of course, was not a "Soviet arts journal," as misstated on page 135, but rather a Russian weekly magazine that was published from 1910 to 1916 (ed. Vladimir Vladimirovich Derzhanovsky).

Contrary to what the book says on page 178, the Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov did not emigrate from the Soviet Union in 1920. First of all, the Soviet Union did not yet exist. Secondly, in 1920, Ivanov left Moscow for Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, which was then closely allied with Soviet Russia and became a Soviet Socialist Republic when the Soviet Union was formed in 1922. Ivanov emigrated from Baku to Italy in 1924.

I hesitate to nitpick, however; I have had my share of regrettable oversights in my books, too. Far more essential is the fact that *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* is a study of utmost importance. Its narrative is beautifully written, rich in historical sources, and abounds with fascinating insights and intriguing sidelights. It is a major contribution to the literature on this composer, and a must read for scholars, professional performers, music teachers, and music lovers.