

Alexander Scriabin's Black Mass and White Mass: A consideration of philosophical expression in his late piano sonatas

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This paper examines the relationship between Alexander Scriabin's musical language and his philosophy by focusing on his late piano sonatas (Nos. 6-10). In his *Memoirs of Scriabin*, Leonid Sabaneev quotes Scriabin, showing that this composer wrote sonatas of contrasting character: sacred or satanic. In light of this source and the theosophical creed to which Scriabin was devoted, the sonatas were analyzed by taking into account similarities found in them and his orchestral work *Prometheus*. As a result of the analysis, these sonatas can be divided into two groups according to their philosophical content. Nos. 7, 8 and 10 form one group, and Nos. 6 and 9 form the other.

Sonatas Nos.7 (the "White Mass"), 8 and 10 share common techniques also seen in the *Prometheus*. In them, Scriabin imbues themes, motifs and harmonies with symbolic meaning, and, using suitable musical materials for the content of each scene, he expresses his theosophical cosmic view that "everything comes from, and returns to, the one *being*." In Nos. 6 and 9, however, harmonic progressions contrast sharply with those heard in Nos. 7 and 8, and they reflect different content from the other three sonatas. Particularly in No. 9 (the "Black Mass"), the analysis shows the content to be blasphemous: the sacred (the second theme) is desecrated by an evil spell (the first theme).

While composing these sonatas, Scriabin was also mulling over his unfinished *Mysterium*. The writings of his brother-in-law, Boris de Schloezer, indicate that this ultimate work was to concern itself with the theosophical evolution of the universe. This is also the theme of sonatas Nos. 7, 8 and 10, and the other two sonatas also have much in common with one scene of the work. Thus the significance of all five sonatas in the preparation for the *Mysterium* comes to light.