

## Le Poème de l'extase (The Poem of Ecstasy), Op. 54

### Alexander Scriabin

The operative word here is “ecstasy”: not the recreational pharmaceutical but a potent narcotic nonetheless. It comes as no surprise to recall that, at least in the United States, the music of Alexander Scriabin ascended to newfound popularity in the 1960s and early '70s, swept to public consciousness (or semi-consciousness) on a tide of hallucinogenic drugs. “Scriabin’s music sounds like I think — sometimes,” Henry Miller had written, presciently, in his 1959 novel *Nexus*:

Has that far-off cosmic itch. Divinely fouled up. All fire and air. The first time I heard it I played it over and over. Couldn’t shut it off. It was like a bath of ice, cocaine, and rainbows.

As a teenager, Scriabin studied piano and composition alongside his lifelong friend Sergei Rachmaninoff, and when he was 16 he entered the Moscow Conservatory to study music theory and composition with Sergei Taneyev (who championed him) and Anton Arensky (who had doubts). He met with limited success in his composition studies but he did graduate in 1892 with a second-place medal in piano — no dishonor in that, since Rachmaninoff took first. By all accounts, Scriabin was an excellent but not quite top-notch performer, limited by the fact that, as he enjoyed diminutive physical stature (peaking at five-foot-one), his hand spanned only an octave — not to mention that his righthand technique had been impaired by overzealous practice of virtuoso works by Balakirev and Liszt.

*Le Poème de l'extase* is big in that it requires an orchestra of large proportions but it’s not a long piece, with its single movement lasting a little over 20 minutes. It surges through that span with a rarely relenting sense of

extended yearning that seems sprung from the aching loins of *Tristan and Isolde* and that culminates in a dazzling, transcendent release of delayed gratification. But to say that is possibly to project an unwarranted interpretation on a piece whose aspirations were exclusively lofty, or at least were so expressed in a program note, surely by the composer, that accompanied a performance in Moscow shortly after the Russian premiere — one shared with the admonition that anyone reading it at all might as well commit to reading it several times through:

*Le Poème de l'extase* is the Joy of Liberated Action. The Cosmos, i.e. Spirit, is Eternal Creation without External Motivation, a Divine Play with Worlds. The Creative Spirit, i.e. the Universe at Play, is not conscious of the Absoluteness of its creativeness, having subordinated itself to a Finality and made creativity a means towards

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### In Short

**Born:** January 6, 1872, in Moscow, Russia

**Died:** April 27, 1915, in Moscow

**Work composed:** begun in June 1905 and finished in the spring of 1907; orchestration revised later that summer

**World premiere:** December 10, 1908, in New York City, by the Russian Symphony Society, Modest Altschuler, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** January 2, 1921, with Albert Coates, conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** January 19, 2008, Riccardo Muti, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 24 minutes

an end. The stronger the pulse-beat of life and the more the precipitation of rhythms, the more clearly the awareness comes to the Spirit that it is consubstantial with creativity, immanent within itself, and that its life is a play. When the Spirit has attained the supreme culmination of its activity and has been torn away from the embraces of teleology and relativity, when it has exhausted completely its substance and its liberated active energy, the Time of Ecstasy shall then arrive.

“When you listen to *Ecstasy*,” Scriabin told his friend Ivan Lipaev, “look straight into the eye of the sun!” After hearing *Le Poème de l’extase* in 1909, the composer Sergei Prokofiev tendered this reasoned response:

Both the harmonic and the thematic material, and the voice-leading in the counterpoint, were completely new. Basically,

Scriabin was trying to find new foundations for harmony. The principles he discovered were very interesting, but in proportion to their complexity they were like a stone tied to Scriabin’s neck, hindering his invention as regards melody and (chiefly) the movement of voices. Nonetheless, *Le Poème de l’extase* was probably his most successful work, since all the elements in his manner of composing were apparently balanced. But it was hard to imagine, at first hearing, just what he was trying to do.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, chimes, tam-tam, triangle, orchestra bells, two harps, celesta, organ, and strings.

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## Sources and Inspirations

Scriabin often jotted down his flashes of inspiration in notebooks. In one volume he began to inscribe the seemingly endless *Poema extaza* (*The Poem of Ecstasy*), which would become the aesthetic basis for not only *Le Poème de l’extase* but also his Piano Sonata No. 5:



Scriabin, in 1905

The Spirit  
Winged by the thirst for life,  
Takes flight  
On the heights of negation.  
There in the rays of his dream  
Arises a magic world  
Of marvelous images and feelings.  
The Spirit playing.  
The Spirit longing.  
The Spirit with fancy creating all,  
Surrenders himself to the bliss of love. ...

I call you to life, mysterious forces!  
Drowned in the obscure depths  
Of the creative spirit, timid  
Embryos of life, to you I bring audacity! ...