

Notes on the Program

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Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor, Op. 20

Alexander Scriabin

Alexander Scriabin was not the first example in history of a rebel issuing from an aristocratic family. His father was a lawyer in the Russian consular service (a profession considered *déclassée* by the more conservative members of the family), and his mother was an accomplished pianist, a pupil of Theodor Leschetizky at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Alexander was an only child, and he lost his mother to tuberculosis shortly after his first birthday. Since his father was often away on foreign assignments, Alexander was raised by his grandmother, aunt, and great-aunt, who coddled him beyond description. They also encouraged his interest in music. As a teenager he 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), as well as piano with Wassily Safonoff.

Scriabin met with limited success in his composition studies but he did graduate from the Conservatory in 1892 with a second-place medal in piano — no dishonor since Rachmaninoff took first. By all accounts Scriabin was an excellent but not quite top-notch pianist, limited by the fact that, being of diminutive stature (peaking at five-feet-one), his hand spanned only an octave — not to mention that his right-hand technique had been impaired by overzealous practice of virtuoso works by Balakirev and Liszt.

Scriabin's early compositions were mostly piano pieces building on the tradition of Chopin, but in 1896 he composed the Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor, which he

premiered a year later. It was published in 1898, the same year Scriabin was named to the faculty of the Moscow Conservatory. This concerto was Scriabin's first work to use an orchestra; although in 1889 he had composed a Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra, the orchestra part of that piece remained in piano score and was never orchestrated. Although some of the piano writing in the concerto comes across as Chopinesque in its arching phrases and elaborate right-hand filigree, the roles of the piano and the orchestra are far more tightly interlaced here than in Chopin's piano concertos, where the orchestra plays strictly accompaniment. Scriabin keeps the piano almost constantly active, but not always in the spotlight; sometimes the soloist recedes to seem almost an *obbligato* voice within the orchestra.

In Short

Born: January 6, 1872, in Moscow, Russia

Died: April 27, 1915, in Moscow

Work composed: October and November 1896, with orchestration and revision continuing through May 1897

World premiere: October 23, 1897, in Odessa, with the composer as soloist and Wassily Safonoff, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 6, 1973, Georg Semkow, conductor, Vladimir Ashkenazy, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 23, 2012, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Evgeny Kissin, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 27 minutes

A near-crisis occurred when Scriabin's publisher, Mitrofan Belyayev, sent the score to Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov for his appraisal. Rimsky's judgment was withering. He found the score disordered and had issues with aspects of the notation, but he was particularly dismissive of the orchestration, a field in which he was an acknowledged master. Scriabin wrote a simpering reply to Rimsky's criticisms, apologizing profusely, invoking his neuralgia as an excuse and promising to thank Rimsky for his support "by *industriously* exterminating my carelessness." He then made matters worse by mistakenly mixing up his response to Rimsky with a letter he had written to composer Anatoly Lyadov, placing each mis- sive in the other's envelope. It took little to offend Rimsky, who marched into Belyayev's office, placed Scriabin's letter-and-envelope on his desk, and left without

comment. "Your absent-mindedness and carelessness are simply phenomenal," wrote the exasperated publisher to Scriabin. A few months later, having effected revisions, Scriabin wrote to Belyayev asking for Rimsky's address, which he had by then misplaced. Rimsky's response to that draft was again negative, and he handed it off to Lyadov with an excoriating cover letter: "Look at this filth. ... *I have!* ... I am in no condition to cope with such a mush-headed genius." Nonetheless, the concerto reaped success at its premiere, and when Rimsky came to write his memoirs, he allowed that Scriabin was a "star of the first magnitude."

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Scriabin (not) at the Philharmonic

In 1906 Alexander Scriabin traveled to America at the invitation of Modest Altschuler, the conductor of the Russian Symphony Orchestra Society in New York City. From that December into March of 1907, Scriabin gained some acclaim through his performances not only in New York but also on the recital stages of Chicago, Detroit, and other cities. However, the visit also had its downside. Scriabin had married fellow pianist Vera Ivanovna Isakovich in 1897 (the year of the Piano Concerto's premiere), but in 1906 he left her and their two children and entered into a public affair with Tatiana de Schlözer, who also was from a musical family. When Scriabin's mistress and muse joined him in America the scandalous odor of infidelity was too potent for many parties. Wassily Safonoff, who had manned the podium when the Piano Concerto was premiered in Rus-

sia, was by then the Music Director of the New York Philharmonic. He happened to be a good friend of the real Mrs. Scriabin, and he therefore issued the fiat that Scriabin's works should not be performed by his orchestra. The composer and Tatiana ended up leaving New York City in a huff.



Scriabin, at far right, with Tatiana and Leonid Sabaneyev, who published early studies on the composer's works, near the Oka River in Russia, 1912