

Summary of Dissertation Recitals

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my teacher, Professor Arthur Greene, for his tremendous support and excellent guidance in this journey. I also want to thank my dissertation committee for their generous help and encouragement. Finally, I want to thank my parents for their selfless love.

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ABSTRACT

The three dissertation recitals explore musical works in Romantic style by major composers including Robert Schumann, Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, Alexander Scriabin, and Sergei Rachmaninoff, with the exception of an early sonata by Franz Joseph Haydn, which was offered for contrast. The first recital featured works by Chopin and Liszt. The first half opened with several of Chopin's character pieces, including two mazurkas, two etudes, and a nocturne, and closed with one of the composer's most demanding works, his *Barcarolle*. The second half concluded with some of Liszt's less frequently performed pieces, including transcriptions of two songs by Ludwig van Beethoven and one from George Frideric Handel's opera, *Almira*, and an original waltz, in addition to his virtuosic *Transcendental Étude* No. 2. The second recital presented three sonata or sonata-like works by Haydn, Schumann, and Rachmaninoff. It opened with the classical sonata that demonstrated Haydn's lighthearted and lyrical styles, and proceeded to Schumann's most emotional work, the *Fantasie in C major*, Op.17, originally entitled "a sonata for Beethoven" as a contribution to Beethoven's monument in Bonn. The second half concluded with a substantial, but infrequently performed, work by Rachmaninoff, his Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 28. The lecture-recital showcased Scriabin's Piano Sonata No.1. The lecture examined the work's cultural and musical inspiration, considered the musical details of each movement, finally revealing some extra-musical aspects of this sonata. Though this sonata and Rachmaninoff's first sonata are unfortunately neglected by performers and listeners, their artistic beauty and emotional power deserve to be revealed.

Tuesday, November 26, 2019, 8:00 p.m., Walgreen Drama Center, Stamps Auditorium, The University of Michigan. Frederic Chopin *Mazurka in B-flat minor, Op. 24 No.4, Mazurka in C minor, Op. 30 No.1, Nocturne in B major, Op. 62 No. 1, Etude in C-sharp minor, Op. 10 No. 4, Etude in E minor, Op. 25 No. 5, Barcarolle in F-sharp major, Op. 60*; Franz Liszt *Sarabande un Chaconne über Themen aus dem Singspiel "Almira" von G. F. Händel, S. 181*, Liszt/Beethoven

Wonne der Wehmut, Op. 83 No. 1 (S. 468/5), Mit einem gemalten Bande, Op. 83, No. 3 (S. 468/2), Franz Liszt Transcendental Etude No. 2 in A minor, S. 139/2, Trois Caprices-Valses: Valse de bravoure, S. 214/1.

Friday, January 17, 2020, 7:30 p.m., Performance Hall, Wuhan. Joseph Haydn *Keyboard Sonata in A-flat Major, Hob. XVI: 46*; Robert Schumann *Fantasy in C major, Op. 17*; Sergei Rachmaninoff *Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 28*.

Wednesday, September 23, 2020, 7:30 p.m., School of Music, Theatre & Dance, Britton Recital Hall, The University of Michigan. Alexander Scriabin *Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 6: Its Inspiration, Musical Language and Emotional Power*.

Recital 1 Program



SECOND DISSERTATION RECITAL

ZIXIANG WANG, PIANO

Tuesday, November 26, 2019
Walgreen Drama Center, Stamps Auditorium
8:00 PM

Mazurka in B-flat Minor, op. 24, no. 4	Frédéric Chopin
Mazurka in C Minor, op. 30, no. 1	(1810–1849)
Nocturne in B Major, op. 62, no. 1	Frédéric Chopin
Etude in C-sharp Minor, op. 10, no. 4	Frédéric Chopin
Etude in E Minor, op. 25, no. 5	
Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, op. 60	Frédéric Chopin

Intermission

Sarabande und Chaconne über Themen aus dem Singspiel “Almira” von G. F. Händel, S181	Franz Liszt (1811–1886)
“Wonne der Wehmut”, op. 83, no. 1 (S. 468/5) “Mit einem gemalten Bande”, op. 83, no. 3 (S. 468/2)	Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) <i>arr. Franz Liszt</i>
Transcendental Etude no. 2 in A Minor, S. 139/2	Franz Liszt
Trois Caprices-Valses: Valse de bravoure, S. 214/1	Franz Liszt

Recital 1 Program Notes

Frederic Chopin

Mazurka in B-flat Minor, op. 24, no. 4

Mazurka in C Minor, op. 30, no. 1

The romantic era sees the emergence of musical nationalism, in which Chopin plays an important role. Mazurka is a Polish folk dance, but Chopin's musical talent transforms it to a higher genre that pianists from all nations admire. His mazurkas present many folk qualities, such as the sharpened fourth, triplets in the melody and the open-fifth bass, but each of his mazurkas communicates one or more personal emotions. The B-flat minor mazurka is a good example of mixed feelings. It has elegant and scherzando outer sections, a monologue interlude, a sentimental middle section and a melancholy coda. The C minor mazurka, in a more concise form, conveys a lonely and wandering feeling.

Nocturne in B Major, op. 62, no.1

Many of Chopin's musical passages show the influences of "bel canto" arias, and his nocturnes offer a lot of excellent examples. In these "night songs," Chopin does not waste any chance to present beautiful melodies and harmonies, but he also keeps exploring new possibilities. The B major nocturne is one of his last published compositions, and one of his most poetic pieces. Here, the common melody-accompaniment texture gives way to a more contrapuntal texture; the melodic line almost never ends—the ending note becomes the starting note of the next phrase; after the middle section, the seamless trills decorate the return of the opening melody like a thrilling voice; the piece ends with a dreamy coda that seems to unveil a new universe.

Etude in C-sharp Minor, op. 10, no.4

Etude in E Minor, op. 25, no. 5

Chopin is considered as the first composer who composes “concert etudes,” which combine technical challenges with artistry. From Chopin on, Etude is no longer taken as merely a functional piece to develop pianists’ skills but turns into a character piece that can be programmed in concerts. Chopin composed twenty-seven etudes and published two sets, op. 10(1833) and op. 25(1837), each containing twelve. The C-sharp minor etude is a fiery one filled with running notes and shocking accents. The E minor etude is a *scherzo*, which contains dance-like outer sections and a *trio*—a major-mode middle section in which the left hand plays a lyrical tune.

Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, op.60

Another one of the last compositions of Chopin, *Barcarolle* (1845), is among the composer’s most demanding works. Barcarolle is originally a boat song sung by Venetian gondoliers, and Mendelssohn’s “Venetian Boat Song” (op. 19 no. 6, 1830) sets up many characteristics of the piano barcarolle, including the 12/8 meter, repetitive figuration in the bass and the double thirds/sixths texture. Chopin obviously adopts Mendelssohn’s mold, but he makes it far more complex and deeper. This piece starts with a grand opening on the dominant pedal point, and after a short pause, unfolds with the standard Barcarolle texture. The double-third melody resembles an Italian operatic love duet. As the piece develops, it flows more rapidly and accumulates increasing energy with thicker texture. Right before the last section, a beautiful nocturne appears, and then, the opening material returns with greater joy and irresistibly leads to an ecstatic outburst.

The second half of this program introduces some of Liszt’s unknown and less played pieces.

Franz Liszt

Sarabande und Chaconne über Themen aus dem Singspiel “Almira”, S. 181

Saraband und Chaconne is a free transcription based on the opening scene of Handel’s first opera *Almira*. That Liszt chose to compose an arrangement on a young Handel’s work at the age of sixty-eight is noteworthy, not to mention it is his only transcription on baroque music in the late period. Though Liszt retains the melodic contours and basic harmonies of the original, he makes many changes. First, he changes the order of the dances (in the opera, the Chaconne is

danced by males and Saraband is danced by females); moreover, he adds a couple variations after each dance and some original passages, and the result is two sets of variations bridged by a transition, which offers some most beautiful moments in this piece.

“Wonne der Wehmut”, “Mit einem gemalten Bande”, S. 468/5&2

The following two Beethoven songs transcribed by Liszt are chosen because of their contrasting characters. *Wonne der Wehmut* (“Joy in Melancholy”) is a sad love song, which utilizes word-painting techniques. Between the sorrowful singing lines are those falling scales, representing the tears. *Mit einem gemalten Bande* (“With a colorful ribbon”) is a happy love song that celebrates joyful things in Spring—trees, flowers and youth. Unlike his virtuosic song transcriptions on Schubert’s lieder, Liszt adopts the simplest compositional skills in these two pieces to present sincerest feelings.

Transcendental Etude no.2 in A Minor, S. 139/2

Liszt published a set of twelve etudes in 1824 (when he was thirteen) and a revised version with greater technical difficulties in 1838, however, neither of them is close to what is remembered and played today—the 1852 version. The final version is truly a set of masterpieces, which are still technically challenging but also extremely musical and artistic. No. 2 in A minor does not have a nickname, but its character is so obvious that listeners can immediately catch it. The whole piece is based on one short motif, which bears some transformations and variations as the piece goes on, thus making this etude full of surprises.

Valse de bravoure, S. 214/1

Valse de bravoure, like the etudes, was revised in 1852 from an earlier version in 1836. Though it is seldom played today, it was considered by Liszt as a valuable work of his in this genre, and he played it frequently during those two decades. Clearly a virtuosic piece, it does not lose any charm that a waltz could offer. Most strikingly, Liszt changes the meter from 3/4 to 2/4 at the end and transforms the waltz theme to an exciting outburst, which finishes with an aggressive ending.

Recital 2 Program

Keyboard Sonata in A-flat Major, Hob. XVI: 46 Joseph Haydn

Allegro moderato (1732 - 1809)
Adagio
Finale - Presto

Fantasy in C Major, Op. 17 Robert Schumann

Durchaus fantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen; Im Legendentone (1810 - 1856)
Mäßig. Durchaus energisch
Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten.

Intermission

Piano Sonata No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 28 Sergei Rachmaninoff

Allegro moderato (1873 - 1943)
Lento
Allegro molto

Recital 2 Program Notes

Joseph Haydn

Sonata in A-flat Major, Hob. XVI: 46

Like his other sonatas composed in 1760s, Joseph Haydn's A-flat major sonata (1767) bears the title "divertimento", a musical genre that indicates a lighthearted mood and contains multiple movements (usually two or three). Though it was composed in his early compositional period, this sonata was not intended for amateur players, but for professional players.

All three movements are written in sonata form. The first movement presents a fantasia-like style: the fermatas that appear at the important spots of the sonata form invite the performer to add cadenzas or short improvisations. The development section contains a long passage in a toccata style, offering a rich variety of colors within the harmonic progressions. The slow middle movement is one of Haydn's most lyrical and peaceful musical compositions; its expressive and sentimental character is explicitly indebted to C. P. E. Bach's *Empfindsamkeit* style. The finale draws the listeners into a totally different sound world, which is full of vividness and energy.

Robert Schumann

Fantasy in C major, Op. 17

Schumann once wrote in an early letter: "The man and the musician in me are always trying to speak at once." Indeed, in the first ten years of his career as a composer, those solo piano works are like his musical diaries, which directly reflect several moments of his personal life – among the lot of them, his Fantasy in C major, Op, 17 is one of the greatest examples.

In the spring of 1836, Schumann and Clara revealed their love to each other, but their love was prohibited by Clara's father, Wick, who took Clara on a concert tour, trying to cool down the passion between the young lovers. Schumann, feeling extremely desperate at that time, composed a single-movement fantasy and called it "Ruins." Schumann would later tell Clara: "I think it is more impassioned than anything I have ever written—a deep lament for you." One can observe abundant musical elements that are associated with Clara and his yearning for her in this

movement, for example, the Clara theme (five-note descending scale), the key of “C” major, and a potential quotation of the last song of Beethoven’s song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (“To the distant beloved”), Op. 98. Interestingly, though originally entitled “Fantasy,” this movement presents a structural plan similar to a sonata form.

However, the idea of using this movement in a large-scale multi-movement composition did not emerge in Schumann’s mind until he read about the project of Beethoven’s monument in Bonn and decided to contribute to this project with “a sonata for Beethoven” – it eventually became Fantasy, Op. 17 (it is noteworthy that the title of this work has undergone a series of changes). As a result, two additional movements were composed. The middle movement is a march in rondo form. The key – E-flat, referring to the first letter of Schumann’s name, also has the relative major/minor key relationship with the “Im Legendenton” of the first movement. Clara expressed that this movement was her favorite and she imagined Schumann was one of the soldiers in the victory march and she was among the girls greeting them. Finally, the contemplative and heartfelt slow movement returns to the C major tonality and finishes this work. Though a slow movement rarely appears at the end of a sonata, the fast-fast-slow scheme adopted by Schumann is surprisingly effective here. In particular is the mediative ending, which leaves the listeners saturated in Schumann’s fantasized world.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sonata No. 1 in D minor, Op. 28

Rachmaninoff’s first piano sonata was composed when the composer was in Dresden during the year of 1907 and he finished the final version of this work in the next year. The original version is said to last for 45 minutes; in a letter to Morozov, Rachmaninoff wrote “this composition will be played by nobody because of its length and difficulty... At one time I wished to make this sonata into a symphony”¹. Later, Rachmaninoff shortened the outer movements and 110 bars were removed. This work was never orchestrated as the composer had wished, however, his letter suggests that he might have had one musical model in his mind at that time – that being Liszt’s *Faust* Symphony. This sonata’s connection with the literary source was further confirmed by the premiere performer, Konstantin Igumnov, who, after playing this work a few times, was

¹ Norris, Geoffrey. *A Catalogue of the Compositions of S. Rachmaninoff*. Scolar Press, 1982, 92.

told by the composer that this sonata was inspired by the German legend – Faust. However, Rachmaninoff never revealed the programmatic content of this sonata on any other occasion, leaving the official interpretation up for dispute.

Like many compositions during this period including Symphony No. 2, Piano Concerto Nos. 2 & 3, *Isle of the Dead*, this sonata is written in the minor mode. It consists of three movements, following the fast-slow-fast structural plan. Throughout the three movements, three primary motifs are used intensively – the fifth, the scale, and the repeating notes.

The fifth motif plays the most important role in the sonata. It appears right away at the beginning of the first movement; the open sound of the fifth immediately draws the listener into a world of legend. The secondary subject theme, made up of the repeating notes, continues in the worldly style of legend with significantly more emotions. The fifth motif turns into falling fifths at the beginning of the middle movement, which is one of the composer's most touching and sincere musical compositions. Unlike the middle movement of the second sonata, which spans a broad range of the keyboard and includes a technical middle section, altogether presenting an instrumental style, this slow movement is concentrated in the middle range of the keyboard, and the melody is almost always singable, producing an amiable and intimate feeling. The coda of this movement includes a passage full of trills shifting up and down within the melodic line; this oscillating sound reminds us of the intensive use of trills in Beethoven's late sonatas and the stirring atmosphere. The last movement features the *Dies Irae* motif in addition to the motives mentioned above. The *Dies Irae* motif has been used in his other works such as Paganini Rhapsody, Etudes Op. 39, but it has never been used so frequently and significantly as in this movement. At the end of the sonata, the repeating notes motif returns; it gets augmented and strengthened with thicker chords, and finishes this sonata with an explosive and tragic power.

Recital 3 Program



DISSERTATION LECTURE RECITAL

ZIXIANG WANG, PIANO

*Wednesday, September 23, 2020
Moore Building, Britton Recital Hall
7:30 PM*

**SCRIABIN SONATA NO. 1 IN F MINOR, OP. 6:
ITS INSPIRATION, MUSICAL LANGUAGE AND EMOTIONAL POWER**

Sonata no. 1 in F Minor, op. 6 (1892)

Allegro con fuoco
Adagio
Presto
Funèbre

Alexander Scriabin
(1872–1915)

Recital 3 Lecture Script

Scriabin Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 6: Its Inspiration, Musical Language and Emotional Power

Not all composers' first sonatas could receive such popularity as Brahms or Beethoven's first sonata does. The first sonatas of important composers such as Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and Prokofiev are often overlooked by listeners as well as performers alike. This is also the same situation for Scriabin's first sonata. When I told a friend that I was learning this piece, she looked very confused and asked: "did he ever compose a first sonata?"

I felt bad for Scriabin but I understood my friend; Scriabin's other sonatas, such as the second and the fourth are extremely popular, and as a result the first sonata becomes rather forgotten among his works. This is not a unique phenomenon pertaining only to Scriabin, however. Another example is Rachmaninoff's first sonata. This piece has been passed over in favor of his second sonata – the second sonata has appeared in concert halls with such high frequency that audiences have gotten used to it and never asked the question "did he ever compose a first sonata?"

I have to confess, when I was introduced to Scriabin's first sonata, I didn't like it at first. It is a strange and fairly difficult piece. However, as time went on and I played this piece more and more, it started to show its beauty and finally, the emotional power of this piece revealed itself to me. I came to realize that many great musical works, like this piece, take more time for performers and listeners to take in; to understand, to explore its beauty. That is why I want to talk about this piece today.

First, I would like to give a brief introduction about Scriabin's life up to the point when he composed this piece. Scriabin was born in a military family. Scriabin's grandfather and all of

his uncles had military careers. His father studied law and later worked in the Russian embassy in Turkey and Greece. Scriabin's mother was an exceptional concert pianist. Five days before she gave birth to Scriabin, she played a solo recital, however, she unfortunately fell ill during the trip back home and died of tuberculosis not long after Scriabin was born.

Scriabin was raised by his aunt, who also gave him his early musical education. He started showing advanced musical aptitude, especially the ability to improvise, at a very young age. When he was 10, he joined the military academy as a cadet, mostly under his family's influences, and after this, he started his serious musical training on piano and composition. Scriabin's gift was recognized by his teachers, who helped him to prepare for the entrance exams of the conservatory. He entered the Moscow conservatory in January 1888 while still in the military academy, from which he graduated in the following year.

During his years at Moscow conservatory, Scriabin's musical talent was further developed and he became the greatest pianist among his peers. In this period of his life, he was deeply attracted to the music of Chopin. His piano professor Safonoff even called him "Russia's Chopin". However, his composition study did not yield the same successful results as his piano study, partly because of the awkward relationship between him and his teacher, Arensky. Scriabin ended up graduating without a diploma in composition. As a rather fortuitous consequence, Scriabin was recognized more as a pianist rather than a composer in the early stages of his career.

In 1891, a personal catastrophe happened to Scriabin. During that summer, Scriabin over practiced and received a hand injury in his right hand. He was told by doctors that this injury would be permanent; this announcement resulted in a brief hiatus in his performing career. Later on, his hand condition improved to the extent that he could give concerts, however, he never stopped worrying about his hand in his later life.

This frustration caused him to rethink his ideas about religion and music, and to start to formulate his own philosophical ideas about those two. The direct creative response to this tragic event was his piano sonata No.1 in F minor, Op. 6. This work is one of the greatest examples to show his intention of delivering ideas through music.

Like Chopin, the majority of Scriabin's published compositions is for piano, with the exception of six orchestra works. His composition career can be divided into three periods. The early period, from 1885 to 1903, Opp. 1-29, shows strong influences of late romanticism; the middle period, from 1903-1910, Opp. 30 - 58, is the transitional period, in which he showed more interests in mysticism and expressionism; the last period, from 1910 - 1915, Opp. 59 - 74, is his mystic period, which saw the new sound world of Scriabin.

According to the preface of the Henle edition, Scriabin composed fourteen sonatas – four of which are his early exercises, and the other ten have been published with opus numbers. Nos. 1 - 3 fall into his early period, nos. 4 and 5 the middle period, nos. 6 -10 the last period.

The stylistic traits of Scriabin's early period came from many sources of inspiration.

The first major inspiration is from the culture of his upbringing. The turn of the 20th century saw the rise of Russian symbolism, also known as the Russian Silver Age. It started first in philosophy and literature and then developed into visual arts and music. The symbolists assume there are “other worlds than ours” – there is a higher reality that is hidden by phenomenal experience. They saw art as a way to approach this higher reality. Music, as the highest art, expresses direct and pure experience of emotions. Through music, one can achieve emotional freedom and restore links with the nature and the universe. The idea is reflected in Scriabin's sonatas as well as his other works. Furthermore, Russian symbolism incorporates themes such as decadence and mysticism, both of which can be observed in Scriabin's music.

Scriabin was a Russian musician, however, the majority of his musical inspiration came from western Europe. During his student period, Scriabin absorbed much of this inspiration from Western European romantic composers such as Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner.

Scriabin's biggest musical idol in this period was Chopin. He wrote the same forms and put the same titles that Chopin used: “polonaise, impromptu, etude, prelude, mazurka, nocturne.” He also used compositional techniques that had been previously employed by Chopin. For

example, his preludes Op. 11 is clearly modeled after Chopin's preludes, Op. 28 – in his work, he used the same key plan and even similar musical moods. Apart from this, many musical elements that are characteristic in Chopin's music, such as accompaniment figures, melody, rhythm, and texture were all absorbed by Scriabin into his compositions. What is most important is that Chopin's delicate, intimate, sensitive, and sensual musical language influenced Scriabin's early musical expression. As a result, this remained a strong influence beyond his early period.

The second key figure is Liszt. Liszt, the greatest piano virtuoso of his time, made a huge contribution to keyboard techniques. Scriabin not only adopted some of Liszt's diabolic piano techniques in his compositions, but also, like Liszt, he was interested in making some special musical effects. In addition to this, Liszt's compositional technique – thematic transformation, also inspired Scriabin especially when dealing with bigger forms such as the sonata form.

The third figure is Wagner. The harmonic ambiguity and prolonged anticipation of cadences in Wagner's music attracted Scriabin and had influences on his musical thinking. Moreover, Scriabin was impressed with Wagner's ability to explore connections between philosophy and music. He was also inspired by Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Besides these three romantic composers, there is another hidden figure, whose influences can be traced in Scriabin's sonatas – that is Beethoven. Scriabin adopted Beethoven's sonata compositional techniques such as cyclic form, that is, to use a theme or motif that occurs in each movement as a unifying device, and connecting the successive movements by unsolved chords. Scriabin even used one of Beethoven's most famous motifs in the last movement of the first sonata, as we will see later. More importantly, Beethoven's sonatas showcase the idea of conflict and reconciliation in his interpretation of sonata form, particularly his last five; this significantly influenced Scriabin's treatment to the sonata form. In their musical thinking, the sonata form is far more than just a compositional structure – it is a device to express one's inner struggling and philosophical thinking. Therefore, like Beethoven and his 32 piano sonatas, Scriabin's sonata output also spans his entire creative life.

The F minor sonata has four movements, a standard number of movements of a piano sonata since Beethoven, however, there is something unusual about the structure. The first three movements follow the traditional piano sonata structure – a sonata-allegro first movement, a slow movement, and a scherzo movement; to finish this sonata, instead of composing a brilliant Finale movement, Scriabin chose to compose a funeral march as the last movement. In addition to that, he blurs the boundary between the third and the fourth movements: the third movement ends with a C dominant seventh chord, which leads to the F minor tonality of the last movement, and then Scriabin wrote the meter of the next movement at the end the third movement to indicate an “attacca” effect. Thus, some analyses treat this piece as a three-movement sonata. These are very telling decisions when we take his desperation at that time into our consideration.

There are two unifying devices in this sonata. The first one is a three-note-scale motif, F-G-Ab. It appears at the beginnings of the first, third and fourth movements, though the character of the motif alters according to the mood of each movement. The other unifying device is the funeral march theme, which is based on the F-G-Ab motif but added with the dotted rhythm. It appears at the end of the first movement, the middle of the second movement, and finally, the last movement. Therefore, though the funeral march is at the end of this sonata, we hear it in the first movement, perhaps even at the very first measure.

Example 1.a Scriabin Sonata No. 1, 1st movement, m. 1 Three-Note-Scale Motif



Example 1.b Scriabin Sonata No. 1, 4th movement, mm. 1-2 Funeral March Motif



The first movement is a standard sonata-allegro movement and the three sections of the sonata form – exposition, development and recapitulation, are easily recognizable. Scriabin even put a repeat sign at the end of the exposition to make the sonata form more “traditional”, an approach he abandoned in his later sonatas. At the very first measure, we are attracted by his use of rhythmic displacement between the two hands (see *Example 2*). This is a new feature that has not been apparent in his previous works. The left hand starts two eighth notes before the downbeat and the right hand enters on the downbeat, and as it continues, the two hands never go together, like they play in different pulses, producing an unsettling feeling. Perhaps, his right-hand injury “inspired” him to make musical sense out of the unevenness between the two hands. The first transition shows Scriabin’s ability to make a restless feeling through the use of sequences and fragmentation. He first introduces the restatement of the opening phrase and then breaks it down into smaller materials – each one higher than the previous one, and finally it explodes into a long phrase with technical brilliance and excitement. The second subject is a Chopin-esque melodic material; added with bolder chromaticism and more linear curves – this melodic contour becomes a typical melodic material in Scriabin’s later sonatas. Several more of Chopin’s influences can be seen in Scriabin’s treatment to the variation of this subject, such as melodic decoration to the rhythm and melody and a 3 to 4 rhythm between the two hands. The closing theme has a strong military sense of character, made obvious by its dotted rhythm and repeated chords.

Example 2 Scriabin Sonata No. 1, 1st movement, mm. 1-2



In the development, Scriabin uses the same materials that have been presented in the exposition, but alters or strengthens their characters. The mighty first theme becomes quiet and mystic. The lyrical second theme is augmented and becomes contemplative. The military closing

theme, now as the main material of the climactic section, becomes more powerful with the help of thicker chords that span a broad range of the keyboard.

It would be a false impression that these characteristic musical elements suddenly came into Scriabin's mind. As I mentioned before, Scriabin had composed four early sonatas, and the E-flat sonata was rewritten to a single sonata-form movement, titled "Allegro Appassionato" and published as Op. 4. Many musical elements discussed above can be seen in this work, such as, melodic lines and their variations, rhythmic patterns, and the intensive use of chromaticism.

Unlike the first movement, which reveals many characteristics that continue to appear in his later sonatas, the second movement presents a style that he never returns to – a choral texture. This movement is in ternary form. The A section consists of block chords with slow motion. It begins with an augmented sixth chord of C minor, the dominant minor of F minor; this novel sound makes us feel distant from the F minor tonality. When the A section comes back after the middle section, the bass line turns into a flowing sixteenth-note line, which consists of written-out trills and chordal leaps with the upper chords floating above. At the end of this movement, the music fades away and resolves firmly to C major, bringing a moment of relief and hope. The chorale-like style of this movement refers to Scriabin's religious belief, seemingly depicting that he was searching for peace after struggling.

The third movement is a scherzo-like movement in rondo form. The principal theme again shows the rhythmic displacement – the left hand is always one eighth note ahead of the right hand, which plays on the downbeat. The emphasis on the third beat in the right hand is a core element of the principal theme, displaying a persistent character. The fast running octaves in the left hand betrays some Lisztian virtuosic inspiration. Both of the two episodes are Chopin-esque. The rhythmic pattern and upward gesture of the first episode remind us of Chopin's scherzo No. 2 and its heroic character (see *Example 3*). The second episode, in place of a "trio" section of a scherzo, evolves from the second theme of the first movement with more chromatic colors. It is gentle and lyrical at first, and later becomes passionate and thrilling when the melody is repeated in octaves supported by bigger chords below. Approaching the end, Scriabin does not finish this movement with a complete statement of the principal theme. Instead, he inserts a new

passage with a radical musical effect (see *Example 4*). This passage starts with accelerated repeated chords with rapidly increasing dynamics; the accumulating energy explodes with a rising gesture, pushing the piano sonority to its extreme. After a long pause, a pale restatement of the theme of the second episode appears, much to our surprise. This technique of starting an accumulation of energy through acceleration, increase of dynamics, rising gestures, followed by a sudden relief, is called *effondrement subit*, meaning “the sudden collapse.” This would later become a signature element of Scriabin’s later musical period.

Example 3.a Chopin Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 31, mm. 1-9

The musical score for Chopin's Scherzo No. 2, measures 1-9, is presented in a piano arrangement. The tempo is marked *Presto* with a quarter note equal to 100 beats per minute. The key signature is B-flat minor and the time signature is 3/4. The score consists of two staves: a right-hand staff and a left-hand staff. The right-hand staff begins with a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a series of chords. A dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) appears at measure 5, and *pp* (pianissimo) at measure 9. A first ending bracket is shown above the right-hand staff at measure 5. An *8va* (octave) marking is placed above the right-hand staff at measure 5. The left-hand staff features triplet accompaniment and a *sotto voce* marking at measure 1. A *1* marking is placed below the left-hand staff at measure 5. The score concludes with a double bar line at measure 9.

Example 3.b Scriabin Sonata No. 1, 3rd movement, m.13

The musical score for Scriabin's Sonata No. 1, 3rd movement, measure 13, is shown in a piano arrangement. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat minor. It consists of two staves: a right-hand staff and a left-hand staff. The right-hand staff features a complex chordal structure with a dynamic marking of *sf* (sforzando) at the beginning. The left-hand staff features a complex chordal structure with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) at the beginning. The score concludes with a double bar line at measure 13.

Example 4 Scriabin Sonata No. 1, 3rd movement, mm. 77-86

The third movement doesn't end with a full cadence, but ends on the dominant seventh chord of F minor, which leads to the funeral march movement. The funeral march has been incorporated into the piano sonata genre by composers before Scriabin, such as Beethoven and Chopin. This movement is clearly modeled after Chopin's "funeral march" in many ways. Firstly, the alternating motion occurs in the bass with the tonic on the strong beats. Unlike Chopin, who introduces some harmonic variants in his music, Scriabin sticks to this pattern, maintaining it throughout the section, therefore making the music more depressing. Secondly, the upper voice starts from the middle register and gradually climbs up with the dynamic level increasing. Notice that the famous Beethoven's "fate motif" is hidden in the middle voice – what a fitting and fabulous allusion. Thirdly, he employs the "quasi niente" effect (see *Example 5*). Though Chopin didn't use this musical term for it, its musical effect is obviously presented in his music. Scriabin makes this effect even more striking by marking *pppp* (pianissississimo). In this middle section, Scriabin returns to the hymn style of the second movement. Similarly, the harmonies are ambiguous, however, Scriabin doesn't exactly leave the F minor tonality – for the key signature is not changed. This section is abstract and almost motionless, except for two measures of a recitative-like melody. The musical expression in the middle section can be understood as a "state of nonexistence", a concept that Scriabin formulated in his later

philosophical thinking; his notebook shows that, in a period of time, he was obsessed to using the phrase “I am nothing” in his writing. At the end of the sonata, the march fades away in the lowest area of the keyboard with an extremely soft sound. Above the bar line appears a fermata. While we are wondering how Scriabin would end this sonata, a last cry of the Ab-F-F motif enters in the high register, representing the tragic destiny of Scriabin’s musical soul.

Example 5 Scriabin Sonata No. 1, 4th movement, mm. 20-29



Scriabin once said: “I cannot understand how to write just music. How boring! Music, Surely, takes on idea and significance when it is linked to a single plan within a whole view of the world. People who just write music are like performers who just play an instrument. They become valuable only when they connect with a general idea. The purpose of music is revelation.”²

Though his argument might be objected by some of his contemporaries, such as Brahms and Hanslick, the extra-musical ideas remain as the core inspiration for his musical compositions. The great Scriabin scholar Faubion Bowers found a potential program to this sonata in the composer’s notebook. Interestingly, it has five sections, suggesting that there were five movements in the initial plan for this sonata.

² Bowers, Faubion. *The New Scriabin; Enigma and Answers*. St. Martin’s Press, 1973, 108.

Bowers points out the thematic unity of this program – it starts and ends with religion. He adds: “Musically, the first sonata begins its burst of mighty drama and inner tragedy with the striving towards the goal of Good or God, and ends with death.”³

Another piece of writing in his notebook offers us a glimpse into his inner world around this time. There is no better source than his own writing to conclude the extra-musical ideas and the emotional content of this sonata, thus I would like to read it as the conclusion of this lecture:

“Early childhood: Love of fairy tales, vivid imagination, religious moods.

Entry into the military school at the age of ten.

Unbounded faith in teachers and in the priest.

Naive belief in the Old Testament. Prayers...

A very serious participation in the mystery of the Eucharist...

At sixteen, a remarkable absence of self-analysis...

At twenty, an ominous hand ailment, a most decisive event of my life.

Fate puts an obstacle, incurable according to the doctors, to the attainment of ardently desired goal - brilliance, fame.

The first serious failure in life.

The first earnest attempt at philosophy; the beginning of self-analysis.

Reluctance to admit that my ailment is incurable, and yet an obsession with somber moods.

First reflections on the value of life, religion, God.

Continued strong faith - in God the Father rather than Christ.

Ardent, long prayers, constant church attendance...

Reproaches addressed to fate and to God.

Composition of the First Piano Sonata with a funeral march.”⁴

³ Bowers, Faubion. Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer, 1871-1915. Kodansha International, 1969, 169.

⁴ Scriabine, Marina, and Slonimsky, Nicolas. Scriabin: Artist and Mystic. University of California Press, 1987, 115.

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