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22 March 2021

Scriabin's *Prometheus*: Program Notes

Alexander Scriabin - a composer whose musical and philosophical goals were centered around guiding humanity towards an "ecstatic transcendence to a higher plane of existence" (Gramophone, 2016) - reached his ultimate demise on April 27, 1915 after suffering from an infected boil on his upper lip (Nicholls). Only four years earlier marked the premiere of his last completed orchestral work - one of remarkable proportions. Scriabin's *Promethee, le poeme du feu,* or *"Prometheus, the Poem of Fire"* is a symphonic poem featuring orchestra, solo piano, organ, Scriabin's *clavier à lumières* (light organ), and chorus. Simon Nicholls of the Scriabin Association states that the work was first performed under maestro Serge Koussevitzky over a century ago in March 1911 in St. Petersburg, Russia (Nicholls). E. A. Baughan has mentioned that at one performance in Queen's Hall in 1914, the entirety of *Prometheus* was "played twice in one afternoon in order that it might be better understood" (Baughan, 1914).

Many people know Alexander Scriabin to be most infamous for his piano works. While contributing a large body of music to the solo piano repertoire, Scriabin also composed six works for orchestra, including five symphonies all written in a ten year period from 1900 to 1910 (Scriabin Association "Works"). Being a well-known synesthete - synesthesia is defined as "a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of color) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated" (Merriam-Webster) - Scriabin's later orchestral works exemplified the connection of multiple senses. *Prometheus* was composed alongside a famously large and unfinished work Scriabin titled *Mysterium*. Anna M. Gawboy and Justin Townsend reference Boris Schloezer's book, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*: "Both projects would involve the coordinated stimulation of multiple senses. While Scriabin contemplated ways to arouse all five senses in the *Mysterium*, he conceived Prometheus as a more limited experiment focused on the interaction between sight and sound (Schloezer 1987 [1923], 254–58)" (Gawboy and Townsend, 2012). Gawboy and Townsend continue by explaining that with the help of technician Alexander Mozer, Scriabin created the "clavier à lumières" (*also called a tastiera per luce*). This was a keyboard instrument that

would illuminate different colored light bulbs upon pressing respective keys. This instrument can be found in Moscow, Russia at the Scriabin State Museum. Gawboy and Townsend reference Leonid Sabaneev, saying that "Scriabin's private experiments with the *luce* left favorable impressions with his friend and biographer Leonid Sabaneev, but Scriabin ultimately decided to withdraw the instrument from the public premiere due to unspecified "technical difficulties" (Sabaneev 1974 [1912], 131)" (Gawboy and Townsend, 2012). Two years after *Prometheus'* premiere, Scriabin began adding more annotations to the *luce* part in the score. These additions consisted of "dynamic changes of light intensity and fantastic special effects such as tongues of flame, lighting, fireworks, and sparks" (Gawboy and Townsend, 2012).

The entirety of Scriabin's *Prometheus* is based on a constructed, multi-octave chord called the *Mystic Chord.* Scriabin "described [it] as the 'chord of the pleroma' or a chord that captures the totality of divine powers" (Kotcheff, 2020). This infamous chord consists of the following construction: *C4, F#4, Bb4, E5, A5 and D6* (Kotcheff, 2020). Tyler Secor explains that because the vast majority of the work is based off of a bespoke chord structure, it does not follow the standard idioms of a diatonic harmonic system. "Many listeners found the composition to be unintelligible" (Secor, 2013), which is most likely the reason for the double-performance in Queen's Hall in 1914, for it to be "better understood" (Baughan, 1914).

Prometheus, according to mythological legend, was a greek God who famously defied the word of Zeus and stole fire from the Gods for humankind to use. Alexander Scriabin, "saw himself as nothing less than a god who, via his art, would not just reveal the cosmos to his listeners but in fact allow them access to it" (Brown, 1998). It can be easily deduced that Alexander Scriabin thought of himself as a Promethean character who, having birthright access to a higher state of being, desired to guide the rest of humanity to this state through his music. Royal S. Brown has inferred that the mystic chord "represents the cosmos out of which everything takes form, just as almost every musical structure, horizontal or vertical, in [*Prometheus*] can be traced back to this chord" (Brown, 1998). The score for *Prometheus* calls for a full mixed chorus, which does not show up until the last few minutes of the performance. The decision to withhold such a large part of the orchestration further adds to the vivacious climax that comes

right at the very end of the piece. This climactic ending has been interpreted by Brown as "perhaps suggesting the triumphant presence of the human within the cosmos" (Brown, 1998).

At a time where new ideals of modernist art were ubiquitous, and many well known works like Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* were being premiered, Scriabin's *Promethee, le poeme du feu* contributed many unique possibilities to the cultural and musical zeitgeist of the early twentieth century. Alexander Scriabin's musical and philosophical goals were astronomically high. His work, *Mysterium* - a seven day festival set in the Indian Himalayas that included all forms of music, dance, theater, poetry, and engaged all five senses in order to "usher humanity into a new and more satisfying plane of existence where even gender seemed to be abolished" (Garcia, 2005) - was merely realized through notes and sketches of Scriabin's. The work that was supposed to usher in an apocalypse was never completed due to Scriabin's untimely lip infection that eventually killed him. The life of a transcendent composer, dedicating his life to the theological evolution of humanity, was cut short due to the lack of proper medication in the early twentieth century.

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