

SCRIABINE

BY BORIS DE SCHLOEZER

EVERY Russian musician leaving his own country to live on the Continent is amazed at the complete lack of recognition which the Occidental world gives to Scriabine. Indeed, the indifference of France even takes the form of hostility toward an art of which, nevertheless, Parisians know little enough.

In Russia, the influence of Scriabine is so far-reaching that there is scarcely one young composer who has escaped it. Many copy him directly, others seek new fields along the road taken by him late in his life, still others attempt to react against him, trying to create in an opposite direction, and yet, proclaiming their "anti-Scriabinism," and invoking Rachmaninoff or Medtner, even they cannot deny the charm of the author of *Prometheus*.

Scriabine's power in Russia has many sources, two of which seem to me to be outstanding. First of all, his effect lies in the spirit, the ecstatic joy which permeates his work, its sorrow, exaltation, and madness. His music acts as a sublimation for those forces in our subjective life which, stirred to a high state of tension, sweep us forward in their frenzied whirl. And emanating from his music is a mystic atmosphere of philosophic preoccupation, the aura of a new religion.

There is a natural and close sympathy between such an art and the apocalyptic dreams that have always held Russia in thrall, and, particularly with the aspirations, the outlook of Intellectual Russia today which, thoroughly roused by the Revolution, beholds the collapse of the old world and the birth of a new one.

Then, also, Scriabine's musical language has its individual effect. Many who remain unmoved by his mystic and ecstatic nature are content to imitate his style and to assimilate, as best they can, his peculiar melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic idioms. Since 1914, Russia, in its artistic isolation, has been subject solely to the influ-

ence of this genius in experimental fields, for when the war broke out Schoenberg was very little known there and Stravinsky and his *Sacre du Printemps* were almost strangers. No counter-influence appeared; Scriabine seemed to be the door to the future. Today, Russia, slowly regaining contact with Europe and becoming gradually more aware of Russians living on the Continent, Prokofieff and Stravinsky, may even be ready for a reaction against Scriabine.



Those forces which have made Scriabine the unquestionable master of young Russia also account for the paralysis of his effect elsewhere. The spirit of his music finds no alliance with the spirit of post-war Europe where one perceives the need of calm, stability, a desire for order, a fear of experiments in every field, in politics, literature, poetry and music. In France, especially, the reigning tendency is traditionalist in the largest sense of that word, embracing nearly all the arts, providing a setting in which Scriabine appears old-fashioned, a *démodé* anarchist. His supreme fervor is out of season in Europe today. Scriabine's restlessness, his over-reaching desire, his "ecstaticism" are felt as vain agitation, weakness and lack of discipline.

The hedonistic predilections of many modern composers have led to a revival of aesthetic conceptions belonging to the eighteenth century when the idea of art for relaxation was prevalent. What could be further from these tendencies than the spirit of Scriabine who believes in music as a special magic, and who dreams of a god-like art whose function is to re-make man and transfigure nature? The art of Scriabine is profoundly revolutionary, especially in relation to the general culture of the Occident which he both opposes and denies in his *Prometheus*. This work is a mighty explosive, without effect in Europe where the conditions for its reception today are unfavorable. The key to this antagonism lies in a comparison of Scriabine with Stravinsky, the man of

the moment, who perhaps best represents the aesthetic tendencies of our era.

Musically speaking, Stravinsky is an outstanding anti-revolutionist, profoundly traditionalist, a point which is in general insufficiently realized. His conceptions of art are purely classic: the artist creates works possessing in themselves a certain value; the objects so created enter a vast system of moral, religious, artistic, economic, and other values, the whole of which makes up our culture.

Scriabine's conception tends toward the destruction of this system, not in order to substitute another, but to directly attain the movement of life itself, its capricious flux. Art for him, as for all romanticists, is but a means to intensify life; he does not wish to create things, mere material possessing independent reality, but to achieve a life larger in scope, richer and more powerful. With him it is not a question of increasing mankind's aesthetic patrimony by adding symphony upon symphony, opera upon opera, as one builds houses to fill out the length of a street, or enlarges the railway system by adding a new line, but of developing the subjective life.

Could he achieve this greater life by working through other channels, or by the magic avenue of will-power, Scriabine would renounce creative art. Moreover, with him, as with Novalis, art tends to fuse completely with the religious ritual. It is well known that the "mystery" of which Scriabine dreamed all his life, and for which he considered his work a mere preparation, was a sort of liturgical act which had for its aim the annihilation of humanity in a beatitude of cosmic ecstasy.



It is obvious that in our life today there is no place for a conception of this kind, not even in the form of a distant dream. But, one might well ask, though the religious and Hindu spirit of his art is foreign to modern Europe, why should Scriabine the artist remain a stranger? His style and very musical language, it is

true, are conditioned by this spirit, but can one not create a dissociation between the mystic and the musician?

Even in the domain of pure music, it seems to me, there is a cleavage between Scriabine and the moderns. In the tendencies of today, varying as they do according to nationality and school, one can distinguish two principal currents. The first, hostile to *Tristan und Isolde*, as well as *Pelleas et Mélisande*, establishes a style melodic and tonal, with complicated but well defined rhythm. The second proceeds directly from *Tristan*, has its most notable representative in Schoenberg, and establishes the predominance of the harmonic, or, perhaps, tends toward the absorption of the melodic by the harmonic which, based on the twelve tones of the tempered scale, wears an atonal character; the rhythmic complexity allies itself to a peculiar metrical instability.



The style of Scriabine also bears a relation to that of *Tristan*. He also tends toward an absorption of the melody by the harmony and to a rhythmic suppleness which constantly fuses the most varied meters and avoids all accentuation not heavily marked. In his later works, Scriabine's harmony also loses all tonal character. And yet his writing is as different from Schoenberg's as it is from Stravinsky's.

This difference is apparent in all his aesthetic principles which represent the complete antithesis of the Viennese composer's expressionism. Scriabine does not dream of limiting himself. He chooses to charm and to command, and his themes are either caresses, incantations, commands or rites. But the fundamental divergence between him and the composers of Europe rests in the fact that he attempts to escape the confines of the tempered scale which to him represents merely a last resort, an imperfect means of realizing musical ideas that actually belong to the ultra-chromatic plan.

Despite proposals for various systems of third and quarter tones, despite attempts to enlarge the basis of the tempered scale,

the music of Europe during the last twenty years has shown no true will to abandon this convention which has been so prolific and whose possibilities are not yet entirely exhausted.

Scriabine, on the other hand, with an harmonic system based on the scale, C, D, E, F sharp, G, A, B flat, which reflects, though imperfectly, the series of over-tones, chooses, more or less consciously, to voyage on the sea of ultra-chromatics. His experiments, followed to their logical conclusion, would lead either to the subdivision of the semi-tone, or to a transformation even more radical of the present system of acoustics, necessitating new instruments and a new notation.

These fundamental hostilities keep Scriabine a stranger to Europe. In the work of an occasional composer one may perhaps find a trace reminiscent of his style. I can distinguish, for example, some sonorous complexities after the Scriabine manner in Honegger's *Dit des Jeux du Monde*. His *Poème de l'Extase* has affected the last work of Delage, *Ouverture pour un Ballet de l'Avenir*. One of the most interesting instances of the kind occurs at the beginning of the third tableau of *Les Noces* where Stravinsky employs a harmony so characteristic of the *Sixth* and *Seventh Sonatas* of Scriabine.

One might extend this list with English and German references but the process would be of little interest. An artist of Scriabine's force exerts no adequate influence through the transmission of a few harmonic groups, a scattering of melodic or rhythmic figures. To be potent, it is his spirit and whole method of writing which should have effect. Before these can be accepted and assimilated in Europe, as the Wagnerian idea was assimilated, a profound crisis, social, intellectual, and moral will have occurred, a crisis not at all impossible, but which it would be far too daring for me to predict.