

CELEBRATING FRANCK & SCRIABIN

Naum Grubert *piano*



CELEBRATING
FRANCK & SCRIABIN

Naum Grubert *piano*

- CÉSAR FRANCK (1822-1890)
- I Prélude, Choral et Fugue
- ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1872-1915)
- Twelve preludes
Op. 16
- 2 No. 1, B major
3 No. 2, G-sharp minor
4 No. 3, G-flat major
5 No. 4, E-flat minor
6 No. 5, F-sharp major
- 7 Op. 9 No. 1, C-sharp minor
(for the left hand)
- 8 Op. 15 No. 1, A major
- 9 Op. 15 No. 2, F-sharp minor
10 Op. 22 No. 2, C-sharp minor
11 Op. 22 No. 3, B major
12 Op. 27 No. 1, G minor
13 Op. 13 No. 3, G major
- Sonata No. 3, Op. 23, F-sharp minor
- 14 Drammatico
15 Allegretto
16 Andante
17 Presto con fuoco
- 18 Feuillet d'album, Op. 45 No. 1,
E-flat major
19 Etude Op. 8 No. 11, B-flat minor
20 Etude Op. 8 No 12, D-sharp minor



Naum Grubert

Naum Grubert (1951) was born in Riga. His principal studies were with the famous professor Gutman in Moscow. He was a prize-winner in the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1978, after having won the 2nd prize at the International Piano Competition in Montreal the year before. He toured extensively the Soviet Union and other European countries before he emigrated from Russia and became a Dutch resident.

His many impressive recitals, as well as concerts with among many others the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Köln Philharmonic, the Tonkünstler Orchestra Vienna, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Helsinki Philharmonic, the Kirov Orchestra St. Petersburg, the Dutch Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rotterdam Orchestra, the Residential Orchestra, have earned him a reputation of superb musicianship:

“For all his virtuosity, he interprets the music as a philosopher or a thinker...”

FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG

“Grubert’s lyricism is balanced with his power and intellect”

THE TIMES

He took part at the Lichfield Festival (Great Britain), the Cadaqués Festival (Spain) the Lockenhaus Festival (Austria) and the Gergiev Festival (Holland), among others. Naum Grubert has performed with conductors such as Paavo Berglund, Sergiu Commissiona, Jean Fournet, Horst Stein, Christopher Seaman, Vernon Handly, Matthias Bamert, Ernest Bour, Ed Spanjaard, Vassili Sinaiski, Thomas Sanderling, Valery Gergiev, Claus Peter Flor, Aldo Ceccato, Evgeny Svetlanov, Stanislav Skrovachevsky. His CD-recordings contain works of Schubert, Liszt, Mussorgsky, Rachmaninoff, Schumann, Beethoven and Chopin.

Naum Grubert holds a professorship piano in the Amsterdam Conservatory. Among his students are many prizewinners of national and international competitions.

CELEBRATING FRANCK & SCRIBIN

When I first thought of recording on the same album Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* and selected early works by Scriabin, I had no inkling that the two composers were born exactly 50 years apart and, when the album was released in 2022, the world would be celebrating the bicentenary of Franck's birth and 150th anniversary of Scriabin's. I simply thought that, despite their largely incompatible creative objectives, their music belonged together. That a mysterious link existed between these two composers on some level, a link that would make them comfortable sharing the same album.

César Franck. *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*

One may suggest that all artists and their creations, within the framework of European art at any rate, to some extent reflect the history of their art as well. Thus the late 19th century and the early 20th are a crossroads where the pathways of many traditions converge, and whence emanate the vectors of development that then disperse in the artistically barren space of the second half of the 20th century.

Standing out against that backdrop is César Franck, the son of a Walloon father and a German mother, who, after studying at the Paris Conservatoire, saw himself as a French musician. Coming together in his work are the typically Germanic inclination towards philosophical reflection, melancholy and drama, and the characteristically French poetic tone, lightness of touch, elegance and gracefulness.

One of the turning points in Franck's creative life came at age 25, when he began working as a church organist. This lifelong link with the Church played a vital role in his evolution and ineluctably led him to Bach, while bringing him even closer to the German tradition. The *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* (PC&F), one of Franck's masterpieces, was written in 1884, during the most productive decade of his life. This work is startlingly original, especially considering when it was composed. That was the time when Wagner, whose influence on Franck's composing technique is indisputable, had just died (in 1883). When still active were Brahms, Liszt (on whose significant influence on the PC&F specifically I shall comment later), Tchaikovsky and Bruckner (whose organ recital at Notre-Dame Franck attended in 1869 and whose artistic destiny largely mirrored Franck's). When coming up soon were Mahler, Strauss, Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin and Rachmaninov.

Franck differs from them all in that he started composing seriously and systematically rather late in life. He was well past 50 when his career reached its peak and his most important compositions began to appear one after another. Thus he was building on a large heritage in the history of 19th century European music.

The PC&F's lineage can be traced first and foremost back to J.S. Bach, with whose music Franck was in touch throughout his life as an organist. According to his pupil d'Indy, Franck's original idea was to apply the latest harmonic and formal innovations to a *Prelude and Fugue* (a form practically forgotten since Mendelssohn). Yet while already working on this composition, Franck realised it was necessary to enlarge the work to three movements by inserting a chorale between the two outside sections. Precedents for this can again be found in Bach, for example in his organ composition *Toccata, Adagio and Fugue*. Later Franck composed several more pieces in the same tripartite form.

Liszt was another source of Franck's inspiration in his work on the PC&F. They met

at least twice: the first time in Franck's youth in Brussels, when he showed Liszt his early works; the second time in Paris in 1866, when Liszt attended a Sunday mass at Sainte-Clotilde basilica. At that time Franck was the organist there, and Liszt sat in the choir, listening to Franck's organ improvisations that by then had gained wide renown. Later that month Liszt even organised Franck's recital in the same church, with the latter playing his own organ compositions.

Here one ought to note that the 1860s marked an extremely difficult, possibly the most tragic, period in Liszt's life. He lost two children one after the other. That brought about changes in Liszt's personal life and precipitated his return to the Catholic Church, with which he had never actually broken up and to which he had been powerfully attracted since childhood. (In his youth Liszt even wanted to enter a seminary, and all his subsequent life he was torn between the attractions of monasticism and secular temptations.)

In the 1860s Liszt lived either in Vatican City or in a Franciscan monastery near Rome, where he attained a lower church rank. During that period Liszt wrote numerous compositions linked in one way or another to his religion. Standing out among them is one of the unquestionable summits of his work: variations on the theme of Bach's cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Sagen* (dedicated to another great pianist, Anton Rubinstein). Liszt was particularly reverential to Bach, calling him "the St Thomas Aquinas of music". I believe it is this piece, inspired by the death of Liszt's daughter Blondine, and written for both piano and organ, that directly inspired Franck's PC&F. A similar sound atmosphere enveloping both works, uncanny parallels in thematic and intonational material, tragic religiosity – none of these could have been coincidental.

As another interesting example of the Bach-Liszt-Franck continuity, the first four notes in the theme motif (bar 1) of the PC&F, f#-e-g-f#, resemble in their outline the c#-b#-e-d# theme of the C# minor fugue from the First Book of the Well-Tempered Clavier, which in its turn is but a slightly modified (in a different key) B-A-C-H theme, his encrypted musical signature in German. Bach famously used it in several compositions, including the third theme in his unfinished *Contrapunctus XVIII* from *The Art of Fugue*. According to his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, his life ended just as his pen had written down that very theme, recurring in counterpoint. Significantly, in 1875 Liszt composed his *Fantasy and Fugue* on the B-A-C-H theme, also in two versions: for piano and organ. Franck certainly could not have failed to know it.

While on the subject of the cultural atmosphere at the time when the PC&F was written, it was then that France saw the birth of the powerful religious and philosophical movement of neo-Thomism, destined to remain influential for many years. It was also the time when many new organs were built in France, including the one Franck loved so much, in the neo-Gothic basilica of Sainte-Clotilde where he worked.

In common with any other 'neo', neither Liszt nor Franck could help inhaling the zeitgeist. That is why their perception of Bach and everything connected to religion and church was inevitably romanticised, coloured by the entire history of music as if refracted through the prism of time. This perfectly natural development in no way diminishes the achievements of their creative genius – half a century later, Stravinsky's concept of baroque music in general and Bach in particular would be thoroughly modernist. Yet the works of Liszt and Franck are immeasurably closer to the source of their inspiration. They evince not a jot of the alienation and rejection so characteristic of modernism. Quite the opposite: their music is permeated with the spirit of love and reverence for their inspiration.

And it is certainly no wonder that the PC&F is an utterly architectural, Gothic work. Just as a Gothic cathedral reaches for the sky, as if eager to rise from the ground, so does Franck's composition inexorably move to its ringing conclusion, to the triumph of the Transfiguration.

How the music is written

The Prelude is built on the juxtaposition of two contrasting sections. The first (bars 1-7) is a very long self-contained theme that miraculously immerses us in the sombre atmosphere of a Gothic cathedral. The theme is shrouded in gentle arpeggiated figurations (demisemiquavers), as if touched with a special muted light breaking through the darkened stained-glass windows and imbuing the whole Prelude with a sense of noble tragedy.

The second section (bars 8-15) is a declamatory recitative made up of short motifs separated by brief pauses. It is a long passage, enunciating a series of dramatic exclamations of pain (bars 8-13) and the sorrowful, meditative, inconsolable replies (bars 13-15, the dominant motif here could be called 'the motif of sorrow'). In this as in the previous section, the descending 'suffering' seconds, so typical of the mournful themes in Bach and Franck himself, are both the concentrated nucleus of the overall expression and the bearing walls of the architectural structure. Practically all the PC&F's themes are so motivically related (compare, for example, the outline of the b-f#-g-d#-e melody (bar 10) with the main c-g-a-b-c-b-f theme of the Chorale in bars 68-70) that one could even speak of 'monothematicism'. Here, as in Franck's D minor Symphony, the formal aspect reveals the indisputable influence of Liszt.

The form here is perfectly symmetrical: A-B-A-B-A. The music in the second B (bars 24-40) is greatly modulated, developing the 'motif of sorrow', while in the last section (bars 41-56) the opening motif of the Prelude changes melodically (bars 42-43), replicating its precursor in both spirit and rhythm. Here again, modulations take the music to its highest dramatic tension (bars 52-54), its culmination, after which it breathlessly attenuates into a *pianissimo*.

In the Chorale, the dramatic flow of the music changes. We leave the realm of suffering for one of meditation and prayer. Here the music is also built on an interchange of two themes different in character. The first theme (bars 58-68), a very long melodic line of vocal narrative, is an intense rumination, while the second one (bars 68-76) – the Chorale's main theme expressed through arpeggiated chords – is sad and detached. Its first appearance in an upper-register *pianissimo* is amazing, so ephemeral and disembodied that it sounds otherworldly. Commentators point out its similarity to the 'bel motif' of Wagner's *Parsifal*, which had premiered several years before the PC&F was written. Franck always wanted to visit Bayreuth, but never managed to do so. Yet Wagner's influence on Franck is obvious. Interestingly, when it first appears, the Chorale theme is diametrically opposite in spirit to Wagner's motif. At the end of the Fugue, the now 'transfigured' theme shows inner kinship to it. Hard to say whether this is a coincidence or a direct quote.

The entire Chorale rests on the relentless movement of the bass crotchets, conferring on the music a sense of motion and unity. The Chorale is written in A-B-A-B-A-B form. The fulcrum of the development comes from the

forementioned second theme, first expressed *pianissimo*. Yet on its second appearance it shifts to a meatier *meno piano*, and at the end of the section to a tragic *fortissimo*. As the music develops, the first theme takes on the role of important transition, setting up the return of the main theme.

Franck offers a remarkably original solution to the problem of a transition from the Chorale to the Fugue (bars 116-157): following the dramatically monumental finale of the Chorale, he unfolds the whole theme of the future Fugue. Nonetheless the listener does not think for a second that this is the beginning of something. The passage sounds like a slow, exhausted reaction to the tragic summit of the Chorale – and ends with a despairing new motif that vanishes into thin air (bars 121,122).

Here, as in the whole work, the proceedings are treated with striking psychological authenticity. Soon the music changes direction: the pedal point on B (bars 129-133) initiates a contrapuntal dialogue between the 'new motif' from the previous passage and the inverted main motif of the Fugue's theme (we are still not in the fugue!). This is a highly mystical moment: we sense that something new is bound to rise out of this enigmatic music. When the pedal point is replaced with F# (bars 137-157), the distance between the registers widens and the tension grows – a stormy, explosive cadenza breaks out and then plunges down from its apex. Two short desperate exclamations in *ritenuto* (a motif from the second theme of the Prelude (bars 8,9) sound over the same F# pedal point, and pouring out of them is the dramatically relentless Fugue theme, this time undisguised (bars 157-161).

Thus the transition section preceding the Fugue, *poco allegro*, could be called 'the birth of the Fugue theme'. And here one has to mention Franck's other 'spiritual father': Beethoven, whose influence almost no 19th century composer ever escaped. In post-Franck France, only perhaps Debussy and Ravel composed great music as if Beethoven had never existed.

It was Beethoven who, following Bach, completed the great turnaround in European music, thanks to which the universal and the human fused into one, with music now able to draw into its orbit and then convey the incredible intricacy of a developing human soul, called "Faustian" by Spengler.

Here one should mention that the influence of Goethe's *Faust* on Liszt is also impossible to overestimate, as is the influence of Liszt's *Sonata*, also in B minor, (often called 'Faustian', with its fugue) on the PC&F in particular and all of Franck's oeuvre in general.

Getting back to Beethoven, between the deep and infinitely sorrowful slow movement and grandiose fugue of his *Sonata Op. 106*, he inserts a short movement, *Introduzione*, which acts as both a psychological reaction to the previous movement and the mysterious birth of the finale. A similar role is played by the recitative section before the *arioso dolente* in the *Sonata Op. 110*.

The *poco allegro* preceding Franck's Fugue follows this pattern. It charts the soul's journey from the Chorale to the Fugue and, when added to the Fugue, it is a definitely personal Faustian search: a vexed soul struggling on its way to religious revelation. This process can be pondered from the standpoint of religious dogma, from the philosophical and lyrical angle or, best of all, I believe, in their synthesis, which was so characteristic of the last great century of European culture.

The Fugue's theme, very Bachian and rhetorical, resembles in its spirit and mode of expression the main theme in the first movement of Franck's *D minor Symphony*. Its first half (from the *tempo primo*, bars 157-159), the intonational kernel of the theme, unfolds as a sequence of two descending 'suffering' seconds (that owe their origin to both themes of the Prelude) adumbrated in the last two bars of the transition section.

The Fugue itself is written in a free style, and, strictly speaking, it is only a fugue proper in its first section, before the cadenza. This long first section has two waves of development (bars 158-217 and 232-286) separated by a rather extended *tranquillo* interlude. The first wave develops according to every convention of the fugue by a perpetual motion of quavers within a broad range both in its emotion and in the sense of organ-piano colouring. After reaching its culmination in the *fortissimo* (bars 206-209), the music regains tonal stability in D major (bars 209-217) based on the material of the concluding motif in the Fugue's main theme. The importance of this rather innocuous, gentle, soothing moment (upbeat to bar 210 to bar 217) can be fully appreciated only at the end of the Fugue, when this material returns before the coda (upbeat to bar 362 to bar 368).

The second wave of the long first section (bar 232) comes after the *tranquillo* of the extended interlude (an interlude only in effect – in fact, it is based on the inverted Fugue theme in *stretto*).

Until its climax in a *fff* (bar 278), it moves along in triplets, which appear in the Fugue for the first time, giving it a new impulse, new energy, adding new pace and drama to the proceedings. The beginning of this second wave (bar 232) comes across as mysterious and troubled, sounding so distinct in its character that it is perceived as the Fugue's second theme. But it is not a double fugue: after two statements and a short bridge passage (bars 232-243) we realise that we are dealing with a new counterpoint dominated by the initial theme. At the grandiose culmination, the strongest, most dramatic exposition of the Fugue theme, the motion slows down from triplets back to the quavers. The effect of this is a sudden resistance to the ineluctable forward motion, with the music coming to an abrupt fermata on the dominant.

There, as if breaking free, the section *come una cadenza* begins, still *ff*. This is an organ-type free cadenza based on a five-note motif rhythmically overlapping with the opening theme of the Prelude. The cadenza flows freely in semiquavers (appearing in the Fugue for the first time, they accelerate the proceedings), with contrasting registers and dynamics. Then the motion in semiquavers gradually attenuates into *diminuendo*, reaching a pedal point on the dominant of B minor *ppp* (bar 309). This ushers in one of the most magical moments of the Fugue: having quieted down, the semiquavers begin to resemble the demisemiquavers at the beginning of the Prelude. At this point we subconsciously expect a return to the very beginning of the whole work, to the theme of the Prelude as supposedly indicated by the entire cadenza. But instead, the piercingly melancholy Chorale theme wafts in like an apparition (bar 311). An amazing moment, that.

Now begins the third, and grandest, section of the Fugue. First, the Chorale theme gently modulates in the soprano register (bar 319). Then, at the third key change, it is cut in half, to be followed by a menacing *stretto* response in the bass (bars 327-331). This is followed by an abrupt shift to the main key, in which the

full theme of the Chorale is stated, in *stretto* with the middle voice and an addition of a powerful, rhythmic 'bell-like' bass. This is accompanied by a steady dynamic ascent and a constant movement of the figurations in semiquavers (bars 331-335). Barging in here, at the moment of greatest tension, amid the *stretto* of the Chorale theme and the raging stream of semiquavers, is the Fugue theme in the middle voice (bar 334) – an incredibly powerful moment. This is the dramatic climax of the whole work: simultaneous overlaying of different lines, a current of the highest voltage. This is Franck's great achievement. And I never cease marvelling at how he managed to realise his idea and still make it playable on the piano.

It then seems that a downturn is about to happen, with the music modulating and one of the bass counterpoints (bar 340) from the Fugue's first section joining these two parallel themes. Yet the culmination is still peaking, and only after this will the tension begin to decline. Another short, dramatic *molto crescendo* to the Fugue theme follows; which reappears in *ff* (bar 356) and only then fades away. And here, just before the coda, another wondrous vision appears: the mystery of the Transfiguration (upbeat to bar 362 to bar 368) that continues until the end. It was a long time ago, in the initial section of the Fugue, in the lull following its first culmination, that its concluding episode in D major was first heard (upbeat to bar 210 to bar 217). The final motif of the Fugue theme was its thematic core. There this short motif recurring in variation formed a gentle melody, a sedative so needed after the dramatic waves of the culmination.

Now the situation has changed, and this melodic line plays a totally different role. Its arrival in a relatively low register over a pedal point on the dominant makes the music sound in the major of the main key. The melody, gentle and caressing in the past, here emits a different light. It acquires mysterious solemnity, making us feel we are witnessing the birth of something significant, uniquely joyous. It is as if the motifs are scattering, trying out different registers (from upbeat 364 to bar 365). Then after a short, tense modulating *crescendo* (bars 365-368), the B major chord finally sounds (bar 369), the stage is bathed in an unbearably bright light, and the coda arrives. Over a B major scale descending in the bass, against a background of bell-like chords vibrated by the pedal, the Chorale's soprano theme sounds up above – transfigured, newly in major, unrecognisably joyous. Such is the exuberant, utterly religious end of this great work.

Scriabin. Sonata No 3.

Alexander Scriabin lived a short life (he died at age 43). Nevertheless he still wrote numerous compositions for the piano and six major symphonic works. If we compare his early compositions with the late ones, it is hard to believe they were written by the same hand – so thoroughly did his work change stylistically, harmonically and philosophically. However, I think Ivan Sokolov, the modern Russian composer and commentator on Scriabin, is right when saying that we have in Scriabin an artist who creates just one giant work over a lifetime, with all individual compositions being but parts of a single design. Seen in that light, his early works are a foundation, a base for his incomparable creative edifice, flying off upwards, towards heights unknown. His music expresses an astonishing pursuit of the spiritual by breaking through the material. Here are his own remarkable

words about creativity: “To create anything at all, one has to set restraining limits. Creativity can’t exist without that. Creativity is an imprint of the spirit on matter, which can only be left at the cost of a sacrifice, specifically that of self-restraint.”

All the compositions on this disc but one (Op. 45) go back to the early period of Scriabin’s work, from 1894 to 1898.

As a rule, dating the work of composers or any other artists has only relative value, since the different stages of their work flow from one to the next smoothly and imperceptibly. However, Scriabin’s sonatas, as well as Beethoven’s sonatas and quartets, are an exception: there a separation into three distinct periods is plainly visible. The *Third Sonata* is the last and most monumental of his early period.

Like so many other pre-revolutionary Russian composers, Scriabin liked to work in Europe. This four-movement sonata was composed in Paris, and its initial name was ‘Gothic’. Later he changed the nomenclature, calling it ‘States of the soul’.

First movement: *Allegro drammatico* (free, wild, passionate soul)

Second movement: *Allegro* (soul, exhausted by suffering, has found a short respite)

Third movement: *Andante* (soul full of love, sadness, inexplicable longings)

Fourth movement: *Presto con fuoco* (soul rejoicing in struggle and a clash of elements)

As we know, there were two dominant musical schools in a post-Beethoven 19th century Europe. There existed, roughly speaking, proponents of pure (absolute) music: Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms (the so-called Leipzig School); and also the opposite camp, the so-called New German School, proponents of ‘programmatic’ music: Liszt, Berlioz, and Wagner – a purely operatic composer. For some reason, the latter accused the former of ossified conservatism. The Russian ‘Mighty Handful’ made an unequivocal choice: they were ideologically inclined towards the ‘programmatic’. However, they made an exception for Schumann who exerted a tremendous influence on both the ‘Handful’ (especially Mussorgsky) and Tchaikovsky. Chopin stood completely aside, as if inhabiting a different musical planet.

It was Chopin who was the closest to early Scriabin spiritually. It is immediately obvious that Scriabin initially used Chopin’s forms: preludes, études, impromptus, mazurkas. He also wrote a waltz, a fantasy, a polonaise and, finally, the sonatas. But that’s not what really matters. What brings Scriabin close to Chopin is something separating him from everybody else: some ineffable poetic quality, flexibility, an enigmatic element of improvisation within a nonetheless perfect form, innate aristocratic sensibility and spirituality. His music has very little of Schumann, though there are echoes of Tchaikovsky’s particular inner warmth – although Scriabin did not like Tchaikovsky, calling him a ‘whinger’.

Yet Scriabin also had another aspect, one that linked him innately to Liszt and Wagner. This link is impossible to overlook, especially in his works of the middle period. It comes across mainly in the harmonic language and form. However, Liszt’s tendency to reflect in music various literary, pictorial and religious themes, along with Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal, seem to have convinced Scriabin to attach programmes to his compositions.

The Third Sonata was his first such foray. Later, programme commentaries will become numerous, extensive and even versified: specifically in the *Fourth* and *Fifth Sonatas*, the *Poem of Ecstasy* and the *Prefatory Act*. The symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, Scriabin’s friend, even gave him advice on verse. Already many of Scriabin’s contemporaries pointed out that these ‘programmes’ had no ‘surplus value’, that any literary ‘explanation’ of music is doomed to failure, not to mention that many of them regarded the literary

quality of his texts as dubious. An opinion exists though that the ‘programme’ for the Third Sonata was written by Tatiana Schletzer, Scriabin’s future wife.

Those who knew Scriabin well and liked his music were always struck by the contrast between the vagueness of his pet religious and philosophical ideas (a hodgepodge of Nietzsche, occultism and theosophy), along with their literary ineptness, and the amazing discipline of his compositional style. At times, he literally calculated the architecture of his works. It is unfathomable how Scriabin managed to convey such immediacy and flexibility even though, up to his last piano works, he used symmetrical four-bar periods more than other contemporaneous composers did.

How the music is written

The first movement is in strict sonata form. Even though hundreds of works have been written in this inexhaustible idiom, it is astounding how great composers remain completely individual each time. Here, Scriabin achieves a striking unity by basing the whole movement on one dominant idea; as if it sprouted out of a single kernel. This kernel (bars 1,2) is the opening molecule of the main theme, in which the octaves ‘jumping’ up a *c#-f#* fourth to the strong beat in both bars, the ‘will motif’ so to speak, the main rhythmic premise of this music, produce two different short melodic responses.

This idea is the basis for the remarkable main theme of the movement, which from the very beginning plunges us into a dramatic maelstrom. It consists of four links of these two-bar phrases, in which each strong beat carries the ‘will motif’, whereas the responses form a long melodic line. This idea goes far beyond the main theme. While developing and modulating, it remains basically unchanged throughout the first 24 bars of the movement.

Interestingly, precisely this *c#-f#* jump opens the introductory theme of Schumann’s *First Sonata*, also in F sharp minor, which is similar to Scriabin’s in its general spirit. Scriabin first uses this rhythmically accentuated jump as the overall idea in the first movement of his *Second Sonata*, and it plays an important role in his music. Later it appears in the *Fourth* and *Seventh Sonatas* and also in the *Poem of Ecstasy*. There, in the *Poem of Ecstasy*, these upward jumps are the most important element of the theme that Scriabin himself called the “will theme”. Hence, following Scriabin, I take the liberty of referring to this vital structural element of the Third Sonata as the ‘will motif’. This is one of the most recognisable features of Scriabin’s music as a whole.

The disappearance of this persistent pulse brings to the music an astonishing sense of freedom, and it coincides with the appearance of a contrasting secondary subject with its two themes. The first (bars 25-30) is an amazingly pure and chaste *cantabile* with melodically related contrapuntal inner voices, whereas the second (bars 31-42), more flighty and whimsical, is based on a motif that already appeared as one of the ‘responses’ in the primary subject (bars 11,12; 15,16 and 21,22). There it was also heard inverted (bars 17-20). Scriabin’s mastery is so remarkable that this sonata does not contain a single motif that was not used later. Harmonically, the secondary subject is mainly sustained by subdominant functions both in F# minor (the main key) and A major (the relative major). Somehow we already sense the presence of A major, but its final entry occurs only in the extended *codetta*, which makes the secondary subject appear to be ‘suspended’.

The main organising idea of the entire movement again takes over in the *codetta* – the final section of the exposition, turning it into nothing but the main theme transposed into A major. Naturally, the major drastically changes the mood of the theme. It now sounds quietly and solemnly in *mezzo piano*, and one detects in it the potential for some other, transformed, force. Beginning from the fifth bar of the *codetta* (*Tempo primo*) the continuing alternation of the will motifs and responses is joined by the first theme of the secondary subject, which is a brilliant find by Scriabin. A short development reaches its culmination in the first half of the two-bar links of the primary theme (bar 51), then this short motif gradually loses intensity, as if saying farewell.

The throbbing rhythmical pulse continues in the development, which begins by shifting the music into C# minor (bar 55). Here, in a twilight mood, the first secondary theme in soprano polyphonically overlaps several times with the continuing articulation of the initial two-bar link (bars 55, 56 and 59, 60). They are answered with an elevated dialogue between the same theme in the middle voice and its counterparts in the upper voice (bars 57, 58 and 61, 62). It is in this sonata that Scriabin's extraordinary mastery of polyphony manifests itself so powerfully. In the middle of the development (bars 75-78), the two-bar motif of the main theme begins its dialogue with the second theme of the secondary subject. This dialogue brings about a dramatic culmination (bars 83-94), which has been inexorably brewing throughout the development. Here the three themes – the initial two-bar link of the main theme and the two secondary themes – sound simultaneously, raising the tension to its highest point. And then the recapitulation arrives with new *fortissimo* power.

Thus we see that, throughout the monumental sonata allegro, most of the exposition, the recapitulation and almost the entire (!) development are permeated with this persistent bell sound, sometimes menacing, sometimes mysterious, but never ceasing. And only twice, during the short periods of the secondary subject in the exposition and the recapitulation, does it recede, liberating the music from the yoke of this relentless rhythm. That creates a sensation of astonishing unity and perfection.

The second movement, *Allegretto* (a sort of scherzo with an inset Trio, in a 4/8 rhythm unusual for a scherzo) sounds like a playful, slightly macabre fairy tale. The rhythmic bass figure of the theme (bars 1-8) makes the music sound jittery, restless. The short middle episode *con grazia* is more lyrical. Overall, the second movement acts as an intermezzo, a retreat into playfulness after the tension of the first movement. This is the only movement that is autonomous, unrelated thematically to the other movements.

The third movement is Scriabin's real lyrical masterpiece. The astounding beauty of the theme (bars 1-8) rests on the measured undulations of the quavers, supported with pastel harmonies and subtle inclusions of counterpoint. Polyphony dominates the middle *doloroso* section. The music is rendered tenebrous and mysterious by the semiquaver line in the middle voice saturated with chromaticism, and also by the two themes, one with 'beckoning' bass motifs, the other in the upper voice. The dialogue between the 'beckoning' motifs sounds through the continuing counterpoint of semiquavers (bars 24-28). After a short culmination (bar 30), the tension gradually abates. The subtle design of the semiquavers loses its chromatic density, while retaining its previous outline. The first theme

again begins to dominate against that background (bars 32-40). The most striking moment of this movement arrives when the line of continuous semiquavers, changing into semiquaver triplets (bar 40), imperceptibly accelerates. These lace-like triplets soar into the upper register, acquiring a magic, otherworldly feel, and it is then *underneath* that lace (bars 43-47) that the theme shifts into the horn register supported by the bass *arpeggio* chords. This creates the unimaginable perspective of a sound picture. "Even the stars are singing here," exclaimed Scriabin when his pupil Nemenova-Luntz played the sonata to him.

Following this lyrical apotheosis of the sonata, when the theme has appeared for the last time, and the semiquaver triplets have descended and died out in the last B major chord, comes the short but dramatically significant bridge passage to the finale (bars 51-58). The first four bars are a *pianissimo* double reminiscence of the main two-bar phrase of the first movement, as if mysteriously sounding from afar. After the music lingers for a moment on the modulation in the last of these four bars (bar 54), the second half of the transition begins *accelerando* (bar 55), now in the key of the F# minor finale. The 'will motif', which in the previous bars sounded like some mystical gong, gradually becomes more insistent. However, the 'replies' to this, still persistent, 'will motif' (bars 55-58) are now different, not related to the first movement. This is a new motif, even more active and explosive rhythmically, which will play one of the leading roles in the finale. And after the four bars of this *accelerando* onslaught, we plunge into the rough, boiling waters of *Presto con fuoco*.

It is now time to mention another important aspect of the Third Sonata. The thing is that, in this most expansive of his sonatas, Scriabin inaugurates a tendency that will soon become all-encompassing: a search for unity among the movements, which will eventually lead him to reducing their number. Already his *Fourth Sonata* is in two movements: the short first one is a poetic, contemplative introduction to the second, linked as it is by an *attacca* to the second movement. And the main theme of the first movement appears, triumphant and ecstatic, in the second movement's coda. Starting from the *Fifth Sonata*, all subsequent ones will be in one movement only. This tendency goes back to Liszt who breaks away from the suite principle in his *B minor sonata*, incredible in both conception and execution, and also in his symphonic poems.

In the Third Sonata, this tendency towards a maximally condensed, concentrated thought ("Music lives by its thought," goes Scriabin's wonderful aphorism) is also linked with the monothematic principle. I have already mentioned the paramount importance of the initial pulse, the c#-f# 'will motif' opening the first movement and seemingly subjugating it to its rhythmical premise. The c#-d#-f# motif opening the theme of the third, lyrical movement covers the same interval with the same emphasis. When listening to the sonata, we unconsciously sense this link between the two movements, so contrasting in every other respect.

And so to the *Presto con fuoco*. Its vexed, wavering theme dominating almost the entire finale is its main image, recurring against the background of the rushing, turbulent waves of the accompaniment. Both its beginning and intonational kernel are in the same ascending c#-f# fourth, which has just sounded (in a different key) in the bridge to the finale, and which opened the sonata. The first half of the theme is remarkable: after the aforementioned jump, the theme descends down the chromatic scale back to c# (bars 1-4). This two-bar phrase is



repeated, with the melodic line seemingly describing two circles. This circling creates an inexplicable feeling of anxiety and vexation that permeates the finale. And then, as if by an exertion of will, the second half of the theme (bars 5-8) – rhythmically tight and insistent – breaks this endless circling, only for it to come back again.

In this exceedingly turbulent and dramatic movement, Scriabin treats sonata form rather freely, but it also has some rondo elements. There is much polyphony here, especially in the development section, using overlapping statements of the theme *stretta* (bars 103-116), the theme's inversions (bars 95-98), and simultaneous statements of different themes (bars 116-124). The secondary theme with its endlessly flowing melodic line is especially beautiful (bars 37-54).

The culmination, apotheosis of the whole sonata (bars 202-213), arrives in the coda. After a dramatic ascent (bars 183-201), the finale theme, having mysteriously begun in *pianissimo* over pedal points on the dominant, fights its way up, as if overcoming resistance. At the crest of the development, the dazzling, triumphant anthem *fff* sounds as the transfigured main lyrical theme of the third movement, with the similarly involved main theme of the finale responding. Then the incremental descent (bars 214-224) starts; the apotheosis theme ends its life in the upper voice, and it seems as if this attenuating line will peter out peacefully. At the same time, deep in the bass, also in *diminuendo*, the muffled theme of the finale goes around its circles. And just as it seems they are about to sink into oblivion, a single note in the almost extinct melodic line shifts the music, as if by mistake, from F# major back into F# minor (bar 224). This suddenly paints the chromatic line of the finale's bass theme, almost all its energy now lost, in a

macabre, sinister colour. A horrible premonition takes hold of us, a short take-off comes in *crescendo* semiquavers, supported by the same circles of the finale theme (bars 225-229). At its top come three short dramatic exclamations (their motifs correspond thematically to the bridge to the finale), separated by tense pauses (bars 230-235), and the music stops on this dramatic note. Thus ends this remarkable sonata.

Scriabin. Selected Preludes, Etudes and *Feuillet d'album*

Scriabin composed small-form music throughout his life. The Preludes Op. 74 (1914) were his last completed opus. He wrote more than 80 preludes altogether.

All these small compositions are poetry itself. Rather than analysing them, one only wants to confess one's love.

I have omitted from the early preludes the twenty-four of Opus 11, since they are a self-contained work in their own right. Of the others, I have selected my 12 favourites and placed them in an order in which they sound best, creating, I think, an impression of unity, a cycle of some sort.

The two études of Opus 8 are among the most famous ones.

Also, I couldn't resist including the *Feuillet d'album* from Op. 45, even though it certainly belongs both stylistically and chronologically with the works of the middle period. This piece is perfect, and at the same time ineffable, as if disembodied – spirit at its purest. I believe it is not out of place when surrounded by Scriabin's early compositions, which only goes to prove the ontological unity of his entire oeuvre.

Naum Grubert

translation from Russian: Alexander Boot



NAVISCLASSICS

Recording Producer and Editing

Daan van Aalst

Recording Venue

Westvest 90, Schiedam

Piano

Steinway D274

Piano Technician

Michel Brandjes

Artwork

Ad van der Kouwe, Manifesta

Photography

Friso Spoelstra (portraits)

Nathan Anderson, Ryan Hutton,

Felix Mittermeier / Unsplash

Booklet text

Naum Grubert

Special thanks to Daniëlle Grubert-Nefkens

www.naumgrubert.com



More information about Navis Classics,
our high resolution downloads and future
releases can be found on
www.navisclassics.com

EARLIER RELEASED



NC14002



NC17005



NC20010