

Piano Concerto in F sharp minor

ALEXANDER SRIABIN

BORN 1871, Moscow, Russia

DIED 1915, Moscow, Russia

FIRST PERFORMED 23 October 1897,
Odessa, with Scriabin as soloist, conducted
by Vasily Safonov

DURATION 30 minutes



'Self-opinionated, warped, strange and distorted.' That was Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's rather brutal appraisal of his former student Alexander Scriabin, delivered later in both men's careers. And despite that unforgiving put-down, it's indeed hard to see Scriabin as anything other than slightly deranged, or a bit of a genius – or probably an element of both.

This is the composer, after all, who towards the end of his life came to see himself as a musical Messiah, even famously writing in one of his many notebooks: 'I am God.' His magnum opus, never completed (and almost certainly impossible to perform), was a work he called *Mysterium*, which would last a week, take place in a specially constructed temple high in the Himalayas, and combine music, dance, words, lights and aromas in an experience that would bring about the end of the world – and transport humanity to a higher plane of existence.

A revolutionary composer

It's easy to mock Scriabin for the excesses of his final years. More importantly, however, he was a key figure in releasing music from the shackles of traditional tonality, ushering in a soundworld of heavily perfumed, mystical harmonies that he claimed to experience as colour (it's doubtful whether Scriabin truly experienced the neurological condition of synaesthesia, as composers including Messiaen have done, but he certainly associated particular keys with colours). To that end, he even built a light organ to project colours into the concert hall, all carefully notated in his orchestral work *Prometheus: A Poem of Fire*.

For his sole Piano Concerto, however, we jump right back to the start of Scriabin's musical career, and to the very beginnings of the musical explorations that would finally lead him to his Himalayan ambitions. In his 20s, Scriabin was known primarily as a virtuoso pianist, one of a legendary group that had been issued forth by the Moscow

Conservatoire in the late 19th century (where Scriabin had been a classmate of Sergei Rachmaninov).

Admiration from Rachmaninov

At the age of 24, Scriabin needed a showpiece to highlight his skills as both a pianist and a composer. The natural step was to write a Piano Concerto, and he reputedly composed the work in just a few days in the autumn of 1896, then taking several months to complete its rich, complex orchestration.

Scriabin himself gave the Piano Concerto's premiere, on 23 October 1897 in Odessa. Figures including Glazunov and Rachmaninov were initially unconvinced, but Rachmaninov soon came round to the piece – and indeed, its influence can be felt in much of his own writing for piano and orchestra, not least his famous Second Piano Concerto, written just a few years after Scriabin's work.

One of its aspects that no doubt troubled Scriabin's colleagues is its unconventional nature – even early in his career, it shows the young composer forging very much his own path. It's hardly a muscular, demonstrative concerto in the mould of Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov, nor is it a glittering Lisztian showpiece of keyboard transcendentalism. Instead, it's a work of refinement, sometimes introspection, dwelling on personal, intimate feelings, and often with a sense of hushed intimacy that places it close to chamber music. Unusually, too, it dispenses entirely with cadenzas – those pyrotechnic passages that allow the soloist to bask in spectacular virtuosic glory – entirely.

The music

In his **first movement**, Scriabin weaves a contemplative, sometimes impassioned narrative around three main themes. The first is a tender, Chopinesque melody heard in the piano right at the start; the second, a lively, perky tune in octaves on the piano, follows shortly afterwards; and the third is a

running, filigree theme that accompanies an expressive horn solo.

The **second movement** is a set of four variations based on a slow-moving, folk-like theme heard in the strings at the outset – Scriabin hinted that it was a melody he remembered from his childhood. The gently sparkling first variation has the theme in the clarinet against delicate decoration from the piano soloist, and after the bouncing, playful second variation, the third is a brooding affair deep down in the piano's lowest register. Scriabin finishes off with an elegant, fresh-sounding fourth variation, full of glittering decoration from the pianist.

His substantial **third movement** is a kind of frenzied polonaise dance, complete with a distinctive figure that sends the piano soloist dashing right up to the top of the instrument's range and back down again. It ends in a blaze of triumphant F sharp major – a key to which Scriabin ascribed particular mysticism later in his career, and which to him represented bright blue. It might seem a long way from the music of his Piano Concerto to the unhinged experimentalism of his final music, but in its own way, the Concerto is no less radical or pioneering.

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