Skryabin's Prefatory Action and Mysterium: Libretto, Sketches, and Divine Unity

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SKRYABIN'S PREFATORY ACTION AND MYSTERIUM: LIBRETTO, SKETCHES, AND DIVINE UNITY

By

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For the Guy Who Put a Dog on It.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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It may seem strange to say this at the beginning of a dissertation, but everything the FSU musicology faculty taught me about music seems secondary now, to who they have taught me to become. No knowledge could compare to the character qualities I’ve admired in you all over the last six years: unflagging persistence, insatiable curiosity, personal expression through scholarly writing, and lifelong dedication to self-education. I can only hope to thank you all by fostering in others the same enthusiasm you have nurtured in me.
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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliterations in this dissertation from the Cyrillic to Roman alphabet, are carried out according to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.¹ Transliteration procedures differ drastically depending on the author’s time period and country. In footnotes and the bibliography, I have cited according to the spelling of each original publication, so there are many spelling variations on a single name within this document.

There are some situations in which it is more appropriate to use the more common spelling of a name or place, rather than follow the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. In the case of titles of works in Russian, I provide the English translation

The original Russian for all translated quotations in this dissertation is provided. Some of these sources are pre-revolutionary Russian texts, which sometimes use slightly different letters than are available in modern Russian, for example the letter “и” and “ё.” In these cases, I have changed spellings to the modern Russian.

Below is a table listing transliteral variations from Cyrillic to the Roman alphabet and, in the case of work titles, translational variations that can be found within this dissertation and in academic literature. The original Cyrillic spelling is given first, followed by my preferred spelling in bold, then other variations.

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² This is the museum’s preferred spelling when employees use English on correspondence and on their website.
http://www.anscriabin.ru/
I prefer this spelling of the composer’s name because — 1) it is the literal translation according to the U. S. Board on Transliteration; 2) I feel it best represents the phonetic sound of the name in English; and 3) it is the spelling used in the entry for the composer on Oxford Music Online and in an article by Simon Morrison (“Skryabin and the Impossible,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51/2 [Summer 1998], 283-30.)

Marina is Aleksandr Skryabin’s daughter and has several publications about her father’s work. She signs her publications with the French-influenced spelling of the name, whereas for her father, I prefer the literal, U. S. Board on Transliteration spelling.

Boris Shlëtser immigrated to Paris with his sister, Tat’yana, where Boris began publishing under a Gallicized version of his name, Boris de Schloezer. I’ve chosen to use Boris’ spelling because he regularly published under it. To avoid further confusion and inconsistency, I do the same for Tat’yana.
ABSTRACT

Prefatory Action is an unfinished work existing partially in the realm of hypothetical hearsay, and partially in the drafts of the libretto and musical sketches found after Skryabin’s death. Nearly all of the literature on this piece is cursory, or focuses only on summarizing and reiterating information from his early biographers. This dissertation undertakes an in-depth study of the libretto and sketches, presenting new research on primary sources, and positing interpretations of the work in the context of Skryabin’s theories.

The composer’s philosophies, as described in his private journals, are the product of the diligent study and fusion of studies from contemporary psychology, nineteenth-century philosophy, and Theosophy. Skryabin constructed both an ontology of the nature of consciousness and reality, and proposed strategies for transcending the limited mode of human experience through spiritual and mental unification. Prefatory Action would be both a representation of this unification, and an artistic event that would help educate the human race in order to fully realize it in the future. The Prefatory Action libretto outlines Skryabin’s version of the history of humanity - a cycle of unified, and differentiated consciousnesses - and represents the near future, in which humanity embraces death and abandons corporeal form to mingle their consciousnesses. Contrary to the typical characterization of Skryabin’s ideas, especially those concerning Prefatory Action, as wildly insane, they are actually organized into a fairly consistent and logical system, and they are deeply connected to contemporary occult culture, which would have found many sympathizers in the early twentieth century. The Prefatory Action libretto demonstrates many of the characteristics of modernism, including an emphasis on progress and the future, and the aesthetics of early twentieth-century symbolism and ritualism.

The musical sketches for Prefatory Action contain no obvious connections to the libretto, but they reveal the style of the music intended for the work. Skryabin’s strategies for atonal composition
included deriving octatonic and acoustic collections by stacking intervallic patterns, and outlining and progressively developing very brief fragments of music. Small fragments of some of his late, published works appear in the *Prefatory Action* sketches, helping to flesh out our understanding of both the *Prefatory Action* style and the compositional process for Skryabin’s late pieces.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE PREFATORY ACTION SECONDARY SOURCES

[Skrabin] compared himself to a “chalice”... He prepared his precious vessel for the descent of fire, which might have melted it and spilled upon the earth.¹

-Vyacheslav Ivanov

Introduction

Skrabin rejoiced in the violent outbreak of the First World War, as it was clearly an omen that his predictions were correct. He knew that the time for humankind to reunite with God had nearly come. As he considered himself an artist, and one of those few who were highly spiritually developed and educated in the secrets of the cosmos, he felt uniquely qualified to facilitate the journey to heaven, though it would not be an easy one. He knew that individuals would not cease their internal and external struggle against one another without spiritual education on a global scale. His preparatory contribution to this end was to be Prefatory Action, a pedagogical piece that would enlighten the masses concerning the soul’s imprisonment in the body, the false division of the senses, mankind’s true history, and their path to redemption. He also harbored a burning desire to be the one to end the world himself; he dreamed of the perfect artwork, Mysterium, which could accomplish this feat with enough participation from his fellow man. He suddenly died of blood poisoning in April 1915, before he could realize these projects.

The myths surrounding his apocalyptic vision for this piece are the foundation for the posthumously constructed image of the composer as a madman and have become inextricably

¹ Он сравнивал с "чашей"... Он готовил драгоценный сосуд для нисхождения огня, который должен был, упав в сосуд, расплавить его и раздуть по земле.

Vyacheslav Ivanov, Skrabin, ed. O. Tompakova (Moscow: Gosudarstvenny Memoyal'nyi Muzey A. N. Skryabina, 1996), 30-31. (My translation)
interwoven with our representation of Skryabin today. A typical CD booklet included with a
performance of Skryabin’s music reads,

Scriabin is a composer of many paradoxes: an unusually small man of delicate health and
physique who saw himself as a Titan, a heaven-defying Prometheus who would bring
mankind to a new stage of spiritual evolution.  

A typical concert program note reads,

Scriabin’s ego-bound mysticism seems laughable at best, and repugnant at worst. But it
cannot be dismissed out of hand, since it became a principal influence on his music. The
composer’s unorthodox philosophical ideas, and especially his desire to express an erotically
charged ecstasy, eventually led him away from the relatively conventional harmonies and
rhythmic patterns of the 19th century . . . He was, by any measure, quite mad.

For many, his ideas for Prefatory Action and Mysterium reflect upon his entire oeuvre, coloring the
performance and interpretation of his works.

Prefatory Action and its hypothetical counterpart, Mysterium (the distinction between these two
works will be discussed later in the chapter), are familiar topics for both popular and academic
discussions of the composer and his works, but despite the considerable interest in these pieces and
the ideas behind them, much of what is repeated remains inflammatory hearsay based upon
surprisingly little critical investigation. Nearly all scholarship concerning these pieces restates the
detailed memoirs penned by his two zealous early biographers, Leonid Sabaneyev and Boris de
Schloezer. The primary source material on Prefatory Action has been left widely unexplored. This
dissertation examines Prefatory Action as a complex whole within the context of early twentieth-
century religion, musical modernism, and Russian Silver Age culture. Though Prefatory Action was
unfinished, a critical analysis of the secondary sources and Skryabin’s own preliminary material can
provide a fairly clear picture of how and where it would have been produced, what it would have

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2 Simon Nichols, Program Booklet for Alexander Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas, by Marc-André Hamelin (Hyperion
3 Paul Schiavo, Program notes for concert performance by St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, April 17-18, 2015.
sounded and looked (and possibly smelled, tasted, and felt) like, and what message it was supposed
to send. This study is distinguished from previous studies of the piece by its considerable depth, its
detailed sketch studies, its approach to the composer’s philosophies, and its critical view of
secondary sources, giving priority and focus to primary sources concerning Skryabin’s work.

The present chapter examines secondary accounts from those who recorded conversations
with Skryabin concerning Prefatory Action and Mysterium. It identifies discrepancies and
correspondences between accounts in order to differentiate Prefatory Action from Mysterium, posit
elements of staging and performing forces for Prefatory Action, and suggest its intended venue,
audience, and general purpose.

Chapter 2 reconstructs Skryabin’s philosophies, first by analyzing the entire content of his
private journals, then by developing an interpretation of his philosophies in light of his influences
and personal study regimen, drawing on the contents of his personal library and the composer’s
marginal notes therein. This examination reveals Skryabin as an amateur philosopher, building upon
the work of nineteenth-century philosophers by adding modern knowledge on psychological and
spiritual research. This chapter helps explain why Skryabin believed his mission was both necessary
and possible, and illustrates how he constructed the path to bring about his goal of the unification of
mankind.

Chapter 3 analyzes the libretto to Prefatory Action, interpreting the plot, characters, and
meaning of the text in light of the ideas elucidated in Chapter 2. This reveals the dramatic realization
of Skryabin’s cosmology in Prefatory Action. The chapter further explores influences on the libretto
from Theosophical and contemporary literature through Blavatsky’s The Secret Doctrine and his
friendship with the Russian symbolist poets.

Chapter 4 turns to the sketches for Prefatory Action, examining the composer’s use of pitch
collections, his strategy for generating these from intervallic patterns, and prevalent stylistic features
throughout the manuscript. In comparing the sketches to his late published works, the composer’s full late-style compositional process becomes clear and the fragmentary format of the sketches is shown to be a consequence of this strategy. Finally, his style, as seen in the sketches and late works, is considered in the context of contemporary modernist composers.

Chapter 5 reviews the “afterlives” of Prefatory Action, describing the various reconstructive attempts, realizations, and the posthumous influence of the text and music.

Prefatory Action is a complex work, deeply involved in the popular resurgence of interest in occult study in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the interest of serious inquiry into the artistic intentions of this piece, I delve deeply into scientific and religious beliefs that are not widely held, rationalizing them from the composer’s perspective. I suggest approaching Skryabin’s beliefs with a curious and open mind. In my work on this dissertation I have come to understand that there is no fixed concept of “rationality,” and that what constitutes logical science or reasonable spiritual beliefs are a fluid category that changes with time, society, and individuals. As Ray Bradbury puts it, “Insanity is relative. It depends on who has who locked in what cage.”

Primary and Secondary Sources

Skryabin, apparently, spoke to his friends often about his plans for Prefatory Action and Mysterium, so a good deal of secondary source material was written in private journals, and much was published on the subject in the decade after his death. Unfortunately, this body of information is often obscure, contradictory, or heavily biased.

The very basic questions “what is Prefatory Action?” and “what is Mysterium?” are rendered mysterious by the interchangeable use of the titles in historical accounts of conversations with the composer, likely because of the composer’s own fluctuating ideas on the subject. These two works are both, to some extent, hypothetical, and they cannot be wholly separated from one another in aim
and content. Distinguishing between them is not only a matter of sifting through concordances between the secondary sources but also of trying to discover the ambiguous line between Skryabin’s conjectural speculations and genuine plans for performance in the near future. The general conclusion that will be drawn from these sources is that Mysterium was a speculative artistic ritual through which all of humanity would experience ultimate ecstasy and then disintegrate. Prefatory Action was intended to represent Mysterium on stage as a means of acquainting audiences with the idea, making the realization of Mysterium more likely to occur in the near future.

**Prefatory Action and Mysterium in Skryabin’s Letters**

After living abroad for many years, Skryabin and his wife Tat’yana de Schloezer returned to live more-or-less permanently in Moscow in 1910. From that time until his death in early 1915, Skryabin was finally a moderately successful composer and performer, and he had become fairly well-known throughout Europe, particularly in Moscow and London. His works were regularly published by Jurgenson press and he received critical acclaim for both his Poem of Ecstasy and Prometheus symphony. During these years he toured widely to support his growing family, including a Russian tour with Koussevitzky in 1910, a German tour in 1911, and an English one in 1913. This last made a particularly strong impression on him; he was very well received in London and his letters from this time show that he met with a number of like-minded theosophists during his sojourn there. In the last few years of his life he also began spending time in Moscow with a number of Russian poets, including Andrei Belyi, Viacheslav Ivanov, Konstantin Bal’mont (for more information on his relationship with the symbolist poets, see Chapter 3).

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4 Skryabin wanted to marry Tat’yana but could never get a divorce from his first wife, Vera. Tat’yana and Skryabin lived together for a decade and had three children together. She will be referred to in this dissertation as his second wife, regardless, since the couple often represented themselves as being married, and he would sometimes introduce her as his wife.

Skryabin kept no journals during this period of his life (those discussed in Chapter 2 were written from 1904–5), so we have precious little information from Skryabin on his thoughts and plans for Prefatory Action as he labored on the text and music. There are just a bare handful of references to his work on the project from his letters.

In April 1909 Skryabin mentions in a letter to Anatoliy Lyadov that he is nearly done with his text to Mysterium, though this text has never been found. It could be that he later adapted this material for Prefatory Action. While traveling abroad in September 1913 he briefly remarks in two letters to Tat’yana that he is busily working on some poetical text. A few months later, in March 1914, he writes her from Paris that he is nearly finished with the text to Prefatory Action and that he is planning on both of them travelling to India soon. He does not directly connect the India trip to the piece, but they are mentioned together in the same paragraph,

It seems as though this summer I will finish the text and part of Prefatory Action will be in its finished forms of synthetic art . . . Our trip to India is decided. I even bought some clothes.

A few days later, he writes to pianist and conductor Alexander Siloti to cancel their engagements for early 1915 because doctors have advised him not to travel directly from India to St. Petersburg, since, apparently, doctors advised him that the extreme climate change might be unhealthy.

Goldenweiser, Gnessin, and Koonen

Anna Alekseyevna Goldenweiser was a pianist and the first wife of Aleksandr Borisovich Goldenweiser, who was a prominent Russian pianist, composer, and teacher at the Moscow Conservatory.

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7 Aleksandr Skryabin to Tat’yana de Schloezer, Lausanne, 29 September, 1913. Ibid., 608.
8 Мне кажется, что этим летом я окончу текст и часть предварительного действия закончу уже в формах синтетического искусства . . . Последняя наша в Индию решена. Я даже приобрел кое-что из одежды. Aleksandr Skryabin to Tat’yana Schlozer, Paris, 4 April, 1914. Ibid., 632. (My translation).
9 Aleksandr Skryabin to Aleksandr Siloti, Moscow, 7 April, 1914. Ibid., 633-634.
Aleksandr Borisovich was well connected to the Moscow music scene, and knew Skryabin personally, probably from their overlapping years in study at the Moscow Conservatory. Based on letters between A. B. Goldenweiser and Skryabin, their families seem to have known each other for quite some time. In her diary, which is unpublished and housed today in the Glinka Museum in Moscow, Anna Alekseyevna kept detailed personal notes on her encounters with famous musical figures. She describes a detailed conversation with Skryabin on the subject of *Mysterium*:

In this artwork there will not be a single audience member. All will be participants. He [Skryabin] is only disappointed that Wagner did not get enough money to construct a theater, the construction of the invisible orchestra etc., for his reforms; he (Skryabin) needed special people, special artists, completely different, a new culture which money could not create. . . . The piece features performers, certainly, an orchestra, mixed choir, instruments with light effects, dances, marches, processions, incense, rhythmic utterances of text, . . . There will not be decorations [staging and props], only the necessary musical instruments, some special clothing for the participants, fabrics, light effects. . . . for *Mysterium* the necessary effects will be an introduction of smoke, incense, frankincense. He says that the form of the temple, in which *Mysterium* will always be taking place will not always be lifeless and set in stone, it will always be changing with the mood and motion of *Mysterium*. This is certainly done with the help of smoke and lighting, which alters the outlines and architectural contours . . . *Mysterium* will take place over a few days . . . [In the temple] *Mysterium* will always be happening . . . Just as we now go to Bayreuth . . . They will travel to him.
One night, after a concert in Berlin, Skryabin went out to dinner with a large party of Russian composers, artists, musicians and their wives, and he was apparently asked to speak a bit on Mysterium. Two members of the party, the Russian composer Mikhail Fabianovich Gnessin, and Russian actress Alisa Koonen (wife of director Aleksandr Tairov), both wrote brief memoirs of Skryabin’s speech that night, interpreting the event very differently. Gnessin, who famously had little tolerance for Skryabin’s mystic predilections, remembers that the dinner guests were stunned and shocked by his ideas:

Someone asked Skryabin a question about Mysterium . . . He began to speak, gradually becoming more excited by his own dear fantasy: the changing race, world cataclysms, and the celebratory destruction of the present man to the sound of Skryabin's music. At length he explained that what would happen over the six, or probably seven days of this Mysterium, was the destruction (and rebirth?) of the human race. Everyone listened, certainly, reacting differently to what he was saying, but it seemed that most were sympathetic to the prophetic whispers of the extremely talented musician. I remember Ill'in turned to his neighbor and said "what a terrible look in his eyes!" And Skryabin kept talking and talking . . . "in such-and-such day mankind will better understand what occurred on its historical path; in such-and-such . . . " - I don't really remember what else there was . . . "On the fifth day the universal embrace will begin!"

Alisa, on the other hand, found his speech quite compelling:

This was one of the most memorable speeches by Skryabin I've ever heard. He spoke of the difficult times we are going through in life and art, of torturous, boiling passions that shake the world. He finished by saying that when, in art, this boiling reaches a climax, everything comes down to a simple formula: a black line on a white background, and all will be simple, completely simple. For a minute it was silent. Then everyone warmly applauded.

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13 I do not know the exact date of this event, but Skryabin was in Berlin in 1911, 1913, and 1914.
14 This information is from Fedyakin's biography of Skryabin, which unfortunately does not cite his sources for the following accounts. Sergei Fedyakin, Skryabin, (Moscow: Molodaya Gvaridya, 2004).
15 Кто-то задал Скрябину вопрос о Мистерии. . . . он стал рассказывать, постепенно все более опьяняясь дорогими ему фантазиями: смена рас, мировые катализмы и торжественная гибель нынешнего человечества под звуки Скрябинской музыки. Подробно излагалось, что будет происходить в каждый из шести или, вероятно, их семи дней этой Мистерии, гибели (и возрождений?) человеческого рода. Все слушали, конечно, различно относясь к содержанию того, о чем он говорил, но, кажется, равно полны симпатий к пророческому полушепоту необычайно одаренному музыканту. Помню, Ильин наклонился к соседу и сказал "Однако какой ужасающий взор!" А Скрябин все говорил, говорил . . . "В такой-то день человечество будет вспоминать лучшее, что происходило на его историческом пути; в такой-то . . . " - не помню уж, что еще было . . . "В пять день начнется всеобщие обятия! . . . "
M. Gnessin, quoted in Fedyakin, Skryabin, 424-425. (My translation)
All ellipsis are Gnessin's.
16 Это была одна их самых замечательных речей Скрябина, которую я слышала. Он говорил о сложным времени, которое переживает сейчас и жизнь и искусство, о мучительном кипении страстей, которое стряслет мир. И
Leonid Sabaneyev

Skryabin’s two early biographers, Leonid Sabaneyev and Boris de Schloezer, each presented themselves as rival experts on the composer after his death. According to Sabaneyev, in the last few years of his life Skryabin had spoken constantly of his plan to create a piece that would bring about the unification of mankind—he called this theoretical work, *Mysterium*. Skryabin considered all the works he had ever written, but most especially the late works, preparation for this future piece. According to Sabaneyev, Skryabin began planning for it as early as 1905, and he claimed to have realized that he was Christ reborn, a Messiah who would redeem mankind through his works. Sabaneyev writes that Skryabin believed that to carry out *Mysterium* would be an act of rebellion against God, akin to Lucifer’s:

In this conception [of Mysterium], Skryabin took on the role of Messiah, that of a prophet who would be like the "focus" spirit of the world, like the creative center. His creativity . . . would be would be the spark that would ignite the creative fire in all of mankind and create reunification through Mysterium. He considered himself this Messiah who, in the twilight of the existence of the world, would return the world and mankind to the Absolute, to the harmonious, rhythmic accompaniment, to Lucifer, who once created the world with his rebellion against God.

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коначил словами о том, что, когда в искусстве это кипение достигает апогея, все придет к простой формуле: черная черта на белом фоне, и все станет просто, совсем просто. Речь Скрябина произвела сильное впечатление. Минуту стояла тишина. Потом все горячо зааплодировали.
A. Koonen, quoted in Fedyakin, *Skrabin*, 426-427. (My translation)
19 Skryabin was born on Christmas day, according to the orthodox calendar.
21 В этой концепции Скрябин на свою долю брал роль Мессии, того пророка, который есть как бы „фокус“ Духа в мире, как бы творческий центр. Его творчество . . . будет той искрой, которая зажжет творческим пламенем все человечество и совершит Мистерию воссоединения. Себя он считал тем Мессией, который, в сумерках мирового бытия, вернет Мир и человечество Абсолюту, — в стройное ритмическое дополнение Люцифера, некогда создавшему Мир своим творящим восстанием против Бога.
Sabaneyev, *Skrabin* (1922), 20. (My translation)
Sabaneyev explains that, while *Mysterium* was to be the very real unification of mankind, *Prefatory Action* was to be a “great cantata” on the subject,\(^{22}\) whose goal was to prepare the race and hasten the coming of the end.\(^{23}\) *Mysterium* would ideally take place in India; Sabaneyev claims a great bell would summon all participants to the “cradle of humanity.”\(^{24}\) More practically, *Prefatory Action* would take place in a concert hall in London.\(^{25}\) He provides copious details on Skryabin’s production plans, though it is rarely clear when these relate to *Prefatory Action* or *Mysterium*.

There would be no audience; only the initiated would be allowed to participate in the event,\(^{26}\) which Skryabin apparently thought of as “worship,” rather than performance.\(^{27}\) These participants/performers would need to be educated in his philosophies, and they would be arranged hierarchically by innocence around an altar in the center of the building. Skryabin hoped to establish a school to instruct them in his philosophies, and he planned on founding it in London, since censorship was too restrictive in Russia. In addition to dancers, the work would utilize an orchestra, a choir who would sing as well as intone chant, and solo singers. Lights would play an even more important role than in the *Prometheus* symphony, and the smell of incense would act as counterpoint to the music and visual effects, which Skryabin (or Sabaneyev) claimed was an extension of Wagner’s synthesis of arts.\(^{28}\)

Sabaneyev claims that the music to *Prefatory Action* was more complete than it appears to be in the fragmented sketches, because one night Skryabin gave him a private performance of the work on piano, playing long episodes without once referencing the sketches:

> I remember well one night in the year of the war [1914] with Aleksandr Nikolayevich [Skryabin]. The last few days he had written much, working daily at the piano, and it was

\(^{22}\) Sabaneyev, *Skryabin* (1922), 25.
\(^{23}\) Sabaneyev, *Vospominaniya o Skryabinie*, 334.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 95.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 325.
\(^{26}\) Sabaneyev, *Skryabin* (1922), 25.
\(^{27}\) Sabaneyev, *Vospominaniya o Skryabinie*, 333.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 338.
clear that he seethed with creative energy . . . I began preparing to go home but Aleksandr Nikolayevich stopped me. “I want to show you something, he said”. . . Sitting at the piano, Aleksandr Nikolayevich began to show me the sketches to Prefatory Action. There was a lot that was vaguely familiar . . . “Now tell me what you think!” he said, playing. This was, I remember, a rather long episode, unspeakably beautiful; in the music, in which I noticed at once something in common with the famous Prelude op. 74 no. 2, which had left a deep impression in me last season. . . .

29 This was mysterious, full of unearthly sweetness and poignancy, slow harmonies, changing on a background with a quintal bass . . . There were some very unusual transitions and modulations . . . "And here is the appearance of death . . . I'm not finished here, there will be more" . . . this was the collective ascent, the radiance, like "Poem of Ecstasy," but greater and with more complicated harmonies. There were even trills in groups, which resembled the trills at the end of "Poem of Ecstasy." How to describe the style of this music? Probably, its style might be defined as a cross between the first, second, and sometimes the fourth piece in Prelude op. 74; probably these fragments were born in the compositional process of these larger sketches . . . Sometimes there were parts reminiscent of "Guirlandes" from op. 73. A delicate, fragile fabric of sound, in which the music rang sharply, creating a painfully passionate mood . . . Playing, Skryabin became more and more fascinated with himself . . . It seemed to me that I had fallen into an ocean of new music rang sharply, creating a painfully passionate mood . . . Playing, Skryabin became more and more fascinated with himself . . . It seemed to me that I had fallen into an ocean of new music; . . . These "harmonies of death" would not get out of my head. As if in answer to my wishes, Aleksandr Nikolayevich again returned to them and again played the episode with the magical harmonies . . . It seemed enchanted, a sacred realm where sound and light somehow merged into one fragile and fantastic chord . . . But all this coloring was somehow illusory, unreal, dreamy . . .

I think that on this memorable night Skryabin played for me everything he had written, everything that he, to be precise, had composed. The notebook lay on the piano but he did not use it . . . Aleksandr Nikolayevich was not scared of forgetting it; he improvised his material on the piano and remembered everything, not needing the record.

29 Most of the ellipses from this point on are Sabaneyev's.

30 Помню я очень хорошо один вечер, проведенный в этот военный год с Александром Николаевичем. Последние дни перед этим он очень много, ежедневно писал у рояля, видно было, что у него кипела творческая работа . . . я собралась домой, но Александр Николаевич меня остановил -Я вам хочу показать тут кое-что, - сказал он . . . Сидя у рояля, Александр Николаевич стал мне показывать эскиз "Предварительное Действие." Тут было много уже несколько знакомого . . . Вот скажите, какое у вас впечатление! - говорил он, играя. Это было, помню, довольно длинный эпизод несказанной красоты, в музыке которого я сразу уловил нечто общее с той самой знаменитой Прелюдией ор. 74 no. 2, которая оставила во мне такое глубокое впечатление в прошлом сезоне . . . Это были таинственные, полные какой-то незвездной сказочности и остроты, медитативные гармонии, изменяющиеся на фоне стоячих квинтовых базов . . . Там были какие-то совершенно необычные переходы и модуляции . . . Вот это появление смерти . . . Я еще не все тут закончил, там так дальше будет . . . Это было какой-то колоссальный подъем, лучезарный, как в "Поеzма Экстаза," но более величественный и более сложный по гармониям. Даже были трели с групами, напоминаяшие такие же трели в конце "Поеzмы Экстаза." Какой общий тип имел эта музыка? Скорее всего это было ее стиль определять как что-то среднее между прелюдиями ор. 74, Первой и Второй, иногда Четвёртой - видимо, эти маленькие осколки именно родились в процессе композиции этих больших эскизов . . . Иногда было что-то напоминающее "Тиранида" из ор. 73. Нежная, крупная звуковая ткань, которой звучало какое-то остров, до боли знойное настроение . . . Скрябин все больше и больше увлекался сам, играя . . . Мне казалось, что я попал в какой-то океан новых звуков . . . Это "гармонии смерти" не выходили у меня из головы. Как будто отвечая моим желаниям, Александр Николаевич вновь вернулся к ним и снова проиграл весь этот эпизод с его волшебными гармониями . . . Казалось что попал в какое-то зачарованное, священное царство, где звуки и света как-то слились в один хрупкий и фантастический аккорд . . . И но всем этим лежал колорит какой-то призрачности, нереальности, сонности . . . Я думаю, что тогда в эту памятную ночь, Скрябин проиграл мне все, что он написал, все, что он, вернее говоря, "написал," но
Composer and music critic Leonid Sabaneyev had been acquainted with Skryabin since they were both young men in the 1890s. The two had some sporadic contact through the first decade of the century; their letters from this time are friendly, though a bit formal. It wasn’t until Skryabin’s return to Russia in the last few years of his life that they were able to see each other on a regular basis, and they seem to have grown very close. Sabaneyev claimed to have become a regular visitor to the Skryabin household during this time, asserting he was accepted as “one of them.”

Sabaneyev published prolifically on Russian musical life during the Soviet era, and he was, to some extent, Skryabin’s champion during the 1910s and early 1920s. By the time Sabaneyev wrote

Figure 1.1 Leonid Sabaneyev, Aleksander Skryabin, and Tat’yana de Schloezer (from left to right).

Sabaneyev published prolifically on Russian musical life during the Soviet era, and he was, to some extent, Skryabin’s champion during the 1910s and early 1920s. By the time Sabaneyev wrote

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Don Luis Wetzel, “Alexander Scriabin in Russian Musicology and its Background in Russian Intellectual History” (PhD Diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2009), 134.

Ibid., 135.

Photograph reproduced from Fedyakin, Skryabin. No page number given for this insert.
Modern Russian Composers in 1927, however, his attitude towards Skryabin had cooled considerably; here his piano music is described favorably, his orchestral music as poor, but the composer himself is given little attention, and is characterized as having been raving mad.\textsuperscript{34} On the first anniversary of Skryabin’s death, Sabaneyev released his first book of memoirs on the composer, \textit{Skryabin} (1916). He published a slightly revised version in 1922 and then a third book, \textit{Memories of Skryabin} (\textit{Vospominaniya o Skryabine}), in 1925.\textsuperscript{35} Sabaneyev, perhaps not wanting to be associated with Skryabin’s eccentricities, claims in these memoirs that he had little interest in \textit{Mysterium} during Skryabin’s lifetime,\textsuperscript{36} yet each of his subsequent publications included more detail on the topic. His final book on Skryabin, written ten years after the composer’s death, dedicates considerable space to describing in great detail the composer’s monologues on \textit{Mysterium} and \textit{Prefatory Action}. Sabaneyev’s strong bias against Skryabin’s mysticism is clear throughout his books; he constantly pokes fun at Skryabin’s irrationality, characterizing him as a sort of loveable, naive, idiot-savant whose madness is the cause of his musical genius. He openly mocks Skryabin’s philosophies and poetry concerning the piece (see Chapter 3), while worshipping the music. Sabaneyev wrote in \textit{Memories of Skryabin},

But if he was crazy, it was a fascinating madness. . . . \textsuperscript{37} One more problem emerged, that is the problem of “healthy and sick art” . . . Indeed, the great genius hid, until the last moments, these qualities with the beauty of inspiration, but there was a feeling of some “sick mentality” . . . so characteristic of “psychopathological creativity”\textsuperscript{38} . . . What will happen to him in that terrible moment when he will see for himself that \textit{Mysterium} is impossible, that it is a product of his insane imagination?\textsuperscript{39}  

\textsuperscript{34} Leonid Sabaneyeff, \textit{Modern Russian Composers}, trans. Judah A. Joffe (New York: International Publishers, 1927), 40-50. Concerning Skryabin’s posthumous reception in the Soviet Union, which was strongly influenced by Sabaneyev’s biographies, pianist Dmitri Novgorodsky remarked at the Scriabin Centenary Conference at Cornell University in 2015, that during his musical education in the Soviet Union, the typical narrative concerning Skryabin was that he was a great composer who went mad halfway through his life and began writing unintelligible music. (my paraphrasing).


\textsuperscript{36} Leonid Sabaneyev, \textit{Vospominaniya o Skryabine} (Moscow: Knigozdatelstvo rabotnik prosveshcheniya, 1925), 248.

\textsuperscript{37} Но если он был безумным, то это было увлекательное безумие. Ibid., 94. (My translation)

\textsuperscript{38} Тут испытывалась ещё проблема - проблема "здорового и больного искусства" . . . Правда, великий гений его прикрывал до последних моментов эти качества красотами вдохновения, но чувствовалось в этом все-таки нечто от «больной психики» . . . столь характерные для психопатологического творчества. Ibid., 249. (My translation)

\textsuperscript{39} Что будет с ним в тот страшный для него момент, когда он увидит воочию, что Мистерия невозможна, что это его безумное воображение приблизило к себе. Ibid., 115. (My translation)
Boris de Schloezer

In his writings on the composer, Boris de Schloezer also remembers Skryabin calling himself humanity’s savior because of his work on Prefatory Action and Mysterium, and describing his overwhelming sense of responsibility to educate others through his art:

“Does not the fact that this mystery was revealed to me prove conclusively that I, and no one else, have the power to bring about this fulfillment? It is unthinkable that another person would be able to follow my design, to understand my central purpose! I was the first to behold the ultimate vision, and I must be the one to reveal it!” . . . 40

“I swear to you that if there were someone greater than I am, capable of creating a greater joy on earth than I can, I would immediately withdraw and hand my task over to him. But, of course, I would then cease to live” . . . Scriabin regarded himself as such a sacrificial offering, doomed by his own will, which he identified with the will of the unique, and yearning to consume the world in the fires of ecstasy. . . . 41

Scriabin often envisioned himself standing at the altar of a universal temple as high priest performing the holy Eucharist, or presiding at the last ritual as teacher, educator, and supreme leader of celebrants in the Mysterium, aided in his work by devout votaries. Toward the end of his life, however, Scriabin no longer dwelt on his own role; what was uniquely important to him was the act itself, and he was willing to be dissolved in it.42

Mysterium, according to Schloezer, would not be a staged work, but a very real transformation for humanity that was equated with death.43 Every human in the world needed to participate for Mysterium to be successful - the work would move them all to simultaneous ecstasy, which would break down the barriers of differentiation between individuals, allowing them to become one (this concept is discussed more in depth in Chapters 2 and 3). Even those not physically present at the ritual performance of the work would be able to participate spiritually over great distances.44

Schloezer quotes copiously from his extensive conversations with the composer many years before,45

“Everything is my own creation; time and space are but categories of my activity; other consciousnesses are nothing but creatures of my imagination. It follows, therefore, that the only significant ecstasy is my own, and it must find expression in the collapse of the entire

40 Ibid., 146
41 Ibid., 153-154.
42 Ibid., 269.
43 Ibid., 181, 214-216.
44 Ibid., 268.
45 To me, Schloezer’s extensive quotes from conversations sound a lot like paraphrases of his journals, which Tat’yana had in her possession while living with Boris de Schloezer while he wrote his book.
physical world and the abolition of time and space." Until then, Scriabin would speculate, while he was still an individual, he had to discriminate between objective and subjective states of being, a distinction that would disappear at the moment of universal ecstasy. . . . Only universal ecstasy can grant absolute freedom, all the little “I’s” transfigured in a single moment in the Unique.46

The performance of Mysterium would take seven days and would be preceded by purification rituals. Skryabin, according to Schloezer, imagined that Mysterium would take place in a temple, built explicitly for the purpose in India, with architecture that referenced sexual symbols.47 The natural formations around the temple were also to be considered an important part of the ritual. Physical feelings, tastes, and smell, supposedly would also need to be included, though Schloezer immediately contradicts himself on this point, writing the composer was not serious about the tactile feelings and smells being combined with the symphony, though “Scriabin himself contributed to the propagation of such myths by talking volubly about symphonies of perfumes and caresses.”48 Both dance and music were to be used with the aim of uniting bodies through vibration and coordinated movement. Skryabin apparently put much stock in the vibration of sound waves, as they moved physical matter, including one’s body.49 Schloezer also provides specific performing details for Prefatory Action/Mysterium. There would be an altar in the middle of the performance space and adepts would be arranged hierarchically around it with those who have more important roles closer to the center, and the choir, dancers, and processional participants would stand in lower, outer tiers.50

Schloezer says that the material Skryabin originally intended for Mysterium became part of Prefatory Action instead, which was supposed to be an abridged and more practical compromise to help recruit initiates and spread knowledge of his purpose.51 Prefatory Action was supposed to be a

46 Ibid., 182-184.
47 Ibid., 212.
48 Ibid., 255-256.
49 Ibid., 241-242.
50 Ibid., 294.
51 Ibid., 160-163.
representation of the spiritual act of Mysterium, not the actual event, though only mystic “adepts” would be admitted.\textsuperscript{52} Mysterium was not intended to have a distinction between performers and audience, because such a duality stood in opposition to the concepts behind the piece, but, true to form, Schloezer also contradicts himself on this subject, later saying that, in order to be practical, “Scriabin’s Mysterium might well have been reduced to a performance by both actors and spectators.”\textsuperscript{53} Later, speaking of Prefatory Action, he says that this piece, too, should not have a performer/audience dichotomy, but that it could also be reconfigured for reasons of practical performance.\textsuperscript{54}

Boris de Schloezer came to know Skryabin around the same time as Sabaneyev, first becoming acquainted with him in the 1890s and becoming a closer friend around the turn of the century. Like Sabaneyev, Schloezer was only able to meet regularly with the subject of his biography after Skryabin’s return to Moscow.\textsuperscript{55} Schloezer was equally famous as a musical and literary critic, and he was friends with some of the best-known names of his time in both fields. His sister, Tat’yana de Schloezer, became Skryabin’s second wife, and their relationship began around 1904, so Boris was not only Skryabin’s friend but his brother-in-law and uncle to three of his children. In 1920 Boris and his sister left Russia together, eventually settling in Paris, where he worked for many years as a writer for the Revue musicale on the personal recommendation of Prokofiev.\textsuperscript{56}

Schloezer’s book on the composer, Skryabin. Personality. Mystery. (Skryabin. Lichnost. Misteria.), was first published in 1923 by a Russian press in Germany, Grani.\textsuperscript{57} It was later translated into English by Nicholas Slonimsky and published by the University of California Press as Skryabin: Artist

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 294.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 292-294.
\textsuperscript{55} Wetzel, “Alexander Scriabin in Russian Musicology,” 134.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 14.
Schloezer publicly accused Sabaneyev of seriously misrepresenting Skryabin and his philosophies, mostly due to his portrayal of the composer as a Satanist. Schloezer’s account is not entirely reliable either, as Schloezer contradicts not only Sabaneyev but also himself on a number of subjects, and much more regularly than his rival.

Schloezer writes very little about Skryabin’s music and personal life, and dedicates a considerable portion of his book instead to explaining Skryabin’s theories and intentions surrounding *Mysterium*, though he makes little distinction in his writing between what Skryabin told him on any given issue and his own thoughts on the subject. We might assume, too, that Schloezer’s work includes Tat’yana’s input. Though she is hardly mentioned, Schloezer was living with her while he wrote the monograph and it is hard to imagine his ignoring her as a resource.

Schloezer takes Skryabin’s beliefs much more seriously and is more forgiving towards the composer’s logical inconsistencies. Schloezer speaks of the composer’s love of philosophical debate, though Skryabin apparently had a disdain for extreme rationalism and a distrust of strict scientific data:

> He always had more faith in psychology than in logic. “Logically, it may be an impossibility,” he would say, “but in this instance, one must take a psychological view; logical contradictions

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59 Ibid., 236.
60 Ibid., 240.
abound in spiritual life, and I have more confidence in what I feel intuitively than in any ratiocination” . . .

The farther he retreated from human logic, from rational categories and rubrices, the more perfect and pure grew his own self-contemplation, the more vivid his visions, indescribable in human words. Then, as if fearful of losing himself and perishing in the unknown, he relied more firmly on formulas and schemes of our plane. Each formula, each scheme was for him a support needed to bring about his dreams and visions here on earth.  

Vyacheslav Ivanov

Skryabin’s closest friend among the Russian Symbolist poets seems to have been Vyacheslav Ivanov, a successful and, today, widely admired poet who was deeply involved in studies of ancient Greek art. Ivanov writes that Skryabin was devoted to the concept of death and felt that it should be everyone’s goal to embrace it (which is consistent with the object of the plot of the libretto for Prefatory Action). Ivanov writes that Skryabin felt it was vital to synthesize all arts equally in Prefatory Action/Mysterium (the two titles seemingly used interchangeably), and that the work would even incorporate nature. This ritualistic piece would have no distinction between audience and performers and the participants would all be “neophytes.” The solemn proceedings would be a religious/artistic ritual that was intended to assist performers in disposing of their bodies and ascending to heaven to become “grains of the sacred plurality.” Their ritual act would not necessarily involve everyone in the world, but the actions of a few would instigate spiritual ripples that would influence the entire race. He also clarifies that Mysterium would take place at some undisclosed time in the future but that Prefatory Action was a more tangible, performative work.  

62 Ibid., 62.
63 Ibid., 58.
64 Ibid., 25.
65 Ibid., 35-36.
This information comes from Ivanov’s own memoir on Skryabin, which was planned for publication in 1919 along with his sonnet, “In Memory of Skryabin” (“Pamyati Skryabina”), until the printing company dropped the project. Ivanov’s manuscript was published from the manuscript in the Glinka museum archives in 1997 by the Scriabin Museum, along with a transcription of a speech Ivanov gave on Skryabin to the Moscow Conservatory in 1920. Like Sabaneyev and Schloezer, Ivanov also describes Skryabin’s plans for *Prefatory Action* and *Mysterium*, but his book is much shorter, and he dedicates only a few pages to this specific topic.

Skryabin and Ivanov did not become close friends until just less than two years before Skryabin’s death, but the two men immediately found much in common with each other, and Skryabin regularly attended Symbolist salons at Ivanov’s house. After Skryabin’s death Ivanov publicly came to his defense when Sabaneyev accused the composer of being unable to distinguish between art and religion (Ivanov and his relationship to Skryabin and the *Prefatory Action* libretto is discussed more in greater depth in Chapter 3). Ivanov has a different perspective on Skryabin’s “Messiah complex” than Sabaneyev and Schloezer. He claims that Skryabin felt an overwhelming drive to finish *Mysterium*, that it was his life’s goal, but defends him from accusations of megalomania, claiming he was a simple and honest man with an altruistic plan. He does reference the composer’s “sacred madness” in relationship to *Mysterium*, but seemingly in a poetic sense, and in general demonstrates more affinity for Skryabin’s perspective.

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Comparison of Accounts

Disagreements between Secondary Sources

The distinction between Prefatory Action and Mysterium is perhaps the most confused issue in all the secondary accounts. Skryabin himself likely changed terms at some point, since both Sabaneyev and Schloezer agreed that he first thought of Mysterium, then turned to Prefatory Action as a sort of substitute. Both Sabaneyev and Schloezer agree that Prefatory Action was to be a staged representation of what Skryabin thought would happen, should Mysterium be successfully carried out. Skryabin was designing Prefatory Action to be a pragmatic piece, as Sabaneyev put it, a “staged cantata,” and he had already put considerable work into it. Skryabin was an accomplished producer and performer of his own works, so we might assume that comments relating to pragmatic production issues apply to Prefatory Action (and perhaps, also to Mysterium, in some cases). Following this logic, when narratives fail to distinguish between the two works, more theoretical issues, such as the very real dissolution of human bodies, the possible participation of the whole world, etc., might have been no less real to Skryabin but lay in the realm of the hypothetical Mysterium, which Prefatory Action would only represent, not realize.

As far as the performance, Schloezer, Goldenweiser, and Gnessin report that Mysterium would take place over a few days. Since the libretto for Prefatory Action would probably last about two hours in performance, we might assume that the multi-day event applied only to the hypothetical Mysterium. Though Sabaneyev and Schloezer disagree on Skryabin’s attitude towards theater and its cathartic role, they, along with Ivanov, insist that Skryabin did not intend there to be a distinction between the audience and performers. How this applies to the Prefatory Action/Mysterium distinction is unclear, though perhaps since Prefatory Action was a staged production, there would be an audience, whereas ideally, in Mysterium, all would be participants.
Sabaneyev, Schloezer, and Ivanov agree that only adepts would be admitted, but would this still be true if Skryabin planned on allowing a performer/audience distinction in Prefatory Action? Since Skryabin did not have any adepts by 1915, or a school in London to educate the participants, it seems likely that he would have allowed non-adepts to attend. The same issue holds in regard to the question of whether this would take place in a concert hall or a temple. Sabaneyev thinks that Skryabin believed Mysterium required the entire world’s participation and that it would result in the instant unification of the race, whereas Ivanov describes a gradual, spiritual change that would take place in the world, and felt even by those who did not participate. Either could be true concerning Mysterium. Sabaneyev claims that participants would be arranged around the altar in order of “innocence,” whereas Schloezer holds that performers with more important, solo roles, would be closer to the center. Either could be true, but Schloezer’s version seems more believable, at least in the sense that it would be best applied to Prefatory Action, rather than Mysterium.

The secondary sources mention both London and India as performance locations. Likely, Skryabin had settled on London to premiere Prefatory Action, though he would have preferred India. We might suppose that the temple in India was another hypothetical for Mysterium, if Skryabin hadn’t actually been planning to go there, so there is no way to be sure. Given his recent success with London, it seems likely that, had Prefatory Action been finished, it would have premiered there, and that the environment of the staged cantata would be intended to represent a temple in India.

Concerning the apocalyptic nature of the work, Sabaneyev and Schloezer maintain that Skryabin believed Mysterium would bring about the end of the world (as we know it, at least), but Goldenweiser reports that it would be performed many times, like Wagner festivals in Bayreuth. It seems likely that Goldenweiser’s comments relate to Prefatory Action, an event that Skryabin planned to undertake as a staged production, and that Sabaneyev and Schloezer are referring to the
hypothetical, apocalyptic Mysterium. Sabaneyev claims that Mysterium relates to Satanism, and that a successful performance of the work would return the world to Lucifer. Schloezer disagrees, as do I. Nothing in Skryabin’s journals or in Theosophical beliefs relate to Satanic worship, and his philosophies appear to be entirely altruistic.

Agreements between Secondary Sources

Sadly, agreements between these sources are fewer than the contradictions. All sources agree that the primary purpose of Mysterium was to unify mankind, or in the case of Prefatory Action, to represent this unification. They also consistently agree that the intended performing forces were dancers, a choir, solo singers, and an orchestra, and that these would be arranged in some significant formation around an altar. Visually, smoke, colored lights, and perhaps costumes would be included as part of the production. Schloezer and Goldenweiser agree that scents - incense and perfume - could have also been intended, and Ivanov and Schloezer claimed Skryabin planned on using nature as a vital part of the production, though they do not say how.

Reliability of the Early Secondary Sources

Clearly, Skryabin spoke often about his ideas, and at considerable length. Discrepancies between accounts could be a result of Skryabin changing his own mind on issues, or of individuals misunderstanding or remembering conversations differently, especially considering the substantial amount of time separating Skryabin’s death and the publication of some of Sabaneyev’s and Schloezer’s posthumous memoirs. Agreements between separate accounts of conversations with the

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69. Alternately, it is possible that Skryabin did not really believe that Mysterium would end the world, but since Sabaneyev and Schloezer were enemies, whenever they agree on something it carries double the weight, as far as I’m concerned.

70. Though Schloezer contradicts himself on this point, it seems likely that since both he and Goldenweiser said it in the first place, Skryabin himself probably meant it.
composer are particularly valuable - such concordances are likely closer to the truth. Each of these secondary sources has its own problematic bias that colors the pronouncements presented as coming from the composer himself. This wealth of information, coming primarily from Skryabin’s close friends and family, is certainly valuable in the study of Prefatory Action, but the numerous contradictions between them indicate that any one of these sources has to be handled carefully. None of these accounts can be taken for granted on their own; only critical comparison of these, in conjunction with study of Skryabin’s primary sources, can reveal the most accurate and complete picture of this work.
CHAPTER 2
SKRYABIN’S PHILOSOPHIES

In a single look, a single thought, I embrace you, my world
Like the sermon of Christ
Like the act of Prometheus.¹

-A. N. Skryabin

Skryabin’s Journals and the Exploration of Conscious Process

Skryabin’s journals, though written nearly ten years before Prefatory Action was begun, are an invaluable resource in its study, illuminating the composer’s philosophies and ambitions more clearly than any second-hand account. It was in these notebooks that the composer first began to outline the doctrine that would come to shape his late multi-modal works and Prefatory Action. There are very few extant personal writings by Skryabin, but his journals, far from detailing the trivial minutiae of everyday life (as his letters tend to do), present an invaluable exposition of his cosmology, guided as it was by early twentieth-century psychological, philosophical, and theosophical research. How does one individual’s mind relate to others surrounding it? What is the unified consciousness, and why is it desirable? What is the direction and shape of mankind’s evolution? Skryabin turns his provocative questions over and over, examining them in every possible light.

Stored today in the Scriabin Museum in Moscow, Skryabin’s three journals will be referred to here as Notebooks A, B, and C. Notebook A was written during the summer of 1904, while the composer was living with his family in Switzerland. This journal is the shortest of all; it seems to be one extended essay, written over several hours while sitting in a coffee shop.² Notebook B dates from 1904–5, while Skryabin lived in Switzerland, then Italy.³ This is the longest and most

¹ Единым взглядом, единої мислью, я обнимаю тебя, мой мир. Как проповедь Христа, как подвиг Прометей. Aleksandr Skryabin, Russkye Propile vol. 6, ed. M. Gershenzon (Moskva: Izdanye C. Cabashnikovikh), 155. (My translation)
² Aleksandr Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 132.
³ M. Gershenzon, Russkye Propile vol. 6, ed. M. Gershenzon (Moskva: Izdanye C. Cabashnikovikh), 137.
disorganized journal - it is perhaps important to note that this period was, perhaps, the most
significant and traumatic of his life. He left his wife to live with Tat’yana de Schloezer in Italy, and
the death of his eldest daughter, Rimmi, was closely followed by the birth of another child, Ariadna,
by his new mistress. Notebook C, written from 1905–6, contains sketches for the program that
accompanied his fourth symphony, *Poem of Ecstasy* (1905), alongside the composer’s philosophical
musings. In all three journals, psychological and metaphysical prose speculation alternate with free-
form poetry. These journals were clearly not written with others in mind - they are a working-out
and refining of personal ideas. The writing is often vague and extremely repetitive, and much is
assumed by the author that is not explained to the reader.

This chapter provides an outline of Skryabin’s cosmology as it appears in the journals,
explains references to Wilhelm Wundt’s psychology and nineteenth-century philosophy,
contextualizes discussions of sensation in terms of evolution and contemporary notions of
synesthesia, and explores religious-occult influences. Deciphering these references reveals the
composer’s informed, creative synthesis of science and religion. It will become clear how Skryabin
used psychological texts and observations to create a template for the path to unity. This goal in
itself is strongly influenced by Theosophy, explored towards the end of this chapter. Though
Skryabin had some exposure to Theosophy by the time he began these journals, Theosophical
rhetoric is conspicuously limited (given our retrospective pigeonholing of Skryabin as a
Theosophical composer). Throughout his writings, the most pervasive issues are those relating to
the exploration of consciousness and experience (see Figure 2.1).

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4 Ibid., 176.
5 The poetry in these journals is strikingly similar in tone to the *Prefatory Action* libretto.
Wilhelm Wundt and the Birth of Experimental Psychology

The nineteenth century was a major turning point in the field of physiology. Coming out of the Enlightenment, many scientists believed that humans were essentially machines, and that all behavior was explicable through analyses of bodily functions. By studying the brain only as physical matter, physiologists kept their work neatly separated from that of philosophers, subscribing to Descartes’s mind-body duality. Breakthroughs by figures such as Hermann von Helmholtz, who measured reaction time to sensory stimuli, began to change this perception, drawing attention to our mediated experience of reality through the body.⁶

Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), having worked with Helmholtz, was one of the first to combine physiological study of the brain and nervous system with scientific examination of thought,

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blending physiology and philosophy. Opposing the concept of a mind-body duality, he aimed to prove that the workings of the brain and consciousness were intimately connected. He began using the term “psychology” to refer to the study of the mind as it related to the body, calling himself a “scientist who uses experimental methods to study mental life,” and defining his new field as “the investigation of conscious processes.” In 1878 at the University of Leipzig he established the world’s first psychological laboratory, and he is now widely considered the “founder of scientific psychology.”

Figure 2.2. Wilhelm Wundt (seated) in his laboratory in Leipzig.

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 115.
Skryabin was fascinated by Wundt’s work; he read his books and even attended the psychologist’s lectures in person. At the turn of the century Wundt was particularly popular in European philosophical circles. His writings on experimental psychology were often referenced, for example, during the papers read at the 11th International Philosophy Conference, which Skryabin attended in 1904. Philosophers used new research in psychology as a supply of objective evidence that enriched and supported discussions of the nature of reality, experience, and consciousness.

Skryabin was no exception. He began his own exploration of the nature of reality in his journals with a quotation from one of Wundt’s texts:

(Psychology of Wundt) (p. 21)
1. Internal or psychological experiences do not constitute a separate area of experience alongside others: it is generally an immediate experience.
2. This immediate experience constitutes, not the peaceful unconsciousness (quiet consciousness), but the communication of processes. It is created, not from objects, but from processes.
3. Any such process has, on the one hand, objective content, and on the other - it represents the subjective experience.

Closed Spheres of Sensation

Wundt never explored the phenomenon of synesthesia directly; in fact, his theories of sensation seem to run contrary to the concept at all. Given Skryabin’s interest in multi-modal compositions, Wundt’s theories have a surprising relationship to the composer’s theories. Most of Wundt’s experiments in his Leipzig laboratory focused on measuring reaction time and apperception (attention) abilities. He famously invented a device called a “thought meter,” which would measure “the speed of thought” down to tenths of a second (see Figure 2.3). Designed like a clock, the

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12 (Пенх. Вундата) (стр. 21). 1) Внутренний или психологический опыт не составляет особой области опыта рядом с другими: это вообще непосредственный опыт. 2) Этот непосредственный опыт представляет не покойное содержание, не связь процессов. Он состоит не из объектов, но из процессов. Skryabin, *Russkye Profile*, 132. (My translation)
device had a visual component - a scale at the bottom of a pendulum - and an aural component - a bell at either side of the pendulum that would ring with each swing. Wundt found that if he were try to note the mark on the scale when he heard the bell, it would never be exactly when the bell actually rang, according to the mechanism. He concluded that one’s attention could be either on the sound of the bell, or on the sight of the scale, but not both at the same time.\textsuperscript{13} According to Wundt’s psychology, experiencing different sensations simultaneously is impossible.\textsuperscript{14}

Figure 2.3. Wundt’s “thought meter”

Discussion of sensation in Skryabin’s journals also appears to conform to Wundt’s theories in this regard. Skryabin, in his introspective analyses, often referred to his consciousness and attention in “states,” shifting from one thing to another. Moreover, he referred to sensations as


\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, the composer Leoš Janáček was also fascinated by both Wundt’s psychology, particularly the thought-meter. He owned one himself, and it may have influenced his composing style. Benjamin Steege, "Janáček's Chronoscope," \textit{Journal of the American Musicological Society} 64/3 (Fall 2011), 647-687.
“closed spheres.” For Skryabin, the act of recognizing one sensation is to limit, and thus create another. Thus Wundt’s theories of sensation were folded into the composer’s system of creation through differentiation:

At the present moment, I am writing these lines, listening to the song of the birds, a passing coach, the calls of a peddler, the whistling and conversations of passers-by and many others. Each of the states experienced by me has a closed sphere, inaccessible to the penetration of another because, for example, the song of the birds is only the song of the birds, and not the whistle of the passers-by, etc.

My individuality appears like a universe of a multitude of closed spheres of sensations that die when the next begins.

When we see two colors side by side, we do not see them at the same time. Red, as always, like any sensation in relation to other sensations, involves . . . on the other hand it involves the concentrated attention on it and isolation, so to say to the closed sphere of the sensation of red, completely inaccessible to the sensation of blue, although they exist right next to one another.

Skryabin differentiated his ideas from Wundt’s in that he, optimistically, believed humans have the “potential ability” to perceive more than one sensation at a time. To have such an experience, according to Skryabin, would be an ecstatic spiritual act that could potentially break down barriers between individuals, and even bring them closer to divinity:

The perception of red and blue together, if even to admit the possibility of this direct perception without your act of synthesis, must be regarded as a single complex

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15 В настоящую минуту я пишу эти строки, слышу пение птиц, проезжающий экипаж, выкрикивающего разношёрка, насиживание и разговоры прохожих и многое другое . . . Каждое из переживаемых много состояний есть замкнутая сфера, недоступная проникновению чего бы то ни было другого, потому что напр. Пение птиц есть именно только пение птиц, а не свист прохожих и т.д.
Skryabin, Russkije Priljed', 188. (My translation)

16 Моя индивидуальность является также как и вселенная множеством замкнутых сфер ощущений, умирающих, когда наступает следующее.
Skryabin, Russkije Priljed', 172. (My translation)

17 Когда мы видим два цвета рядом, то мы их видим не сразу. Красный цвет, как и вообще всякое ощущение, как отношение к другим ощущениям предполагает с одной стороны эти другие ощущения, а с другой сосредоточение внимания на нем и изолирование, так сказать замкнутую сферу ощущения красного, совершенно недоступную ощущения синего, хотя существующему только рядом с ним.
Skryabin, Russkije Priljed', 173. (My translation)
sensation, like two spirits (two personalities) in a single body, which is completely possible and similar in its essence.\(^{18}\)

The God-personality in the process of evolution clearly perceives the stage of evolution that he experiences at a given moment, and does not feel all points of his organism - the universe. When he reaches the peak of his ascent, and the time draws near, then he will impart his bliss to the whole organism. Like a man during the sexual act in the moment of ecstasy loses the consciousness of his entire organism and at all points experiences bliss, he will fill the universe with bliss and light the fire. So the Man-God appears as the carrier of universal consciousness.\(^{19}\)

This focus on experiencing multiple sensations simultaneously sheds a new light on multi-modal mixture in his works. He wrote these journals while working on his Symphony no. 4, *Poem of Ecstasy*, which includes an extra-musical poetic text bursting with imagery of fire and colors. After 1906 he began assigning programmatic titles and poems to many of his piano works, *Winged Poem* (1906), *Enigma* (1911), *Dark Flames* (1914), among others. The *Prometheus* symphony (1910) moved from descriptions of imagery to the inclusion of colored lights (though a complete performance was never fully realized during the composer’s lifetime). *Prefatory Action* was meant to be a culmination of his multi-modal experiments to that point, involving every area of sensation he could imagine: music, dance, poetry, smells, feelings, and colored lights. It may be that he hoped to represent the “God-Personality in the process of evolution,”\(^{20}\) or perhaps by overstimulating the audience and

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\(^{18}\) Восприятие-же красного и синего цвета вместе, если даже допустить возможность такого непосредственного восприятия без вашего акта синтеза, должно быть рассматриваемо как одно сложное ощущение, как два духа (две личности) и одно тело, что вполне возможно, и одинаково по своей сущности.

Skryabin, *Russkye Propile*, 172. (My translation)

\(^{19}\) Бог-личность в процессе эволюции отчетливо воспринимает переживаемую им в данный момент стадию эволюции и не чувствует всех точек своего организма - вселенной. Когда он достигает предела высоты предела высоты подъема, а время это приближается, то он сообщает свое блаженство всему организму. Как человек во время полового акта в минуту экстаза теряет сознание и все его организм во всех точках переживает блаженство, так и Бог-человек, переживая экстаз, наполняет вселенную блаженством и зажигает пожар. Человек-Бог является носителем универсального сознания.

Skryabin, *Russkye Propile*, 189. (My translation)

\(^{20}\) Бог-личность в процессе эволюций

performers in every conceivable way, he also hoped to encourage development of their “potential abilities.”

**Synesthesia**

Given the popular belief that Skryabin was a synesthete who saw colors when hearing sounds, the idea that Skryabin’s philosophy held that experiencing separate sensations simultaneously will be surprising to many readers. However, as Anna Gawboy, James Baker, and others have pointed out, the very concept of synesthesia in the early 20th century was being negotiated for the first time. There was no clear distinction, as we have today, between neurological synesthesia and acquired associations across senses.\(^{21}\)

While in London in 1914, Skryabin was interviewed by Charles Myers, a British psychologist conducting one of the earliest scientific studies of synesthesia, who had heard about the color/music correspondence in *Prometheus*. Myers published the results of his interview with the composer in an article titled “Two Cases of Synaesthesia.” Skryabin explained to Myers that he first became aware of his color-music (*not* color-sound) associations at a symphonic concert he attended as an adult with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The two composers disagreed on the color in the piece they had just listened to; the key of D major seemed, to Rimsky-Korsakov, merely yellow, whereas Skryabin believed it had more of a golden hue. Skryabin claimed he had no colors for individual notes, only for certain keys (see Figure 2.4), claiming that other keys that appeared colorless to him might be infrared or ultraviolet. For those keys with which he did experience colors with, he explained that he did not literally see an image, but had a “feeling” of the color. The key of F\(^{#}\) major, for example, he

\(^{21}\) Anna Gawboy, "Alexander Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue: Esotericism and the Analysis of *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* op. 60" (PhD diss., Yale, 2010), 173.
associated with pastoral pieces and so often thought of the color green, like grass. Such experiences are not consistent with neurological synesthesia as it is understood today. In a time when the diagnosis of this condition was ambiguous, Skryabin and those around him considered him a synesthete, though he would probably not be classified as one today. Regardless of his condition, he placed great importance on the idea of cross-sensation experience and applied it in his work for aesthetic, religious, and symbolic reasons.

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Figure 2.4. Skryabin’s color “feelings” spectrum for certain keys, reproduced from Myers, “Two Cases of Synesthesia” The colors on the top are meant to be imagined as a sort of sliding scale, with various combinations possible in between.

The Science of Self-Observation and the Author of Experience

Wundt’s laboratory could measure the body’s reactions and examine them from a physiological standpoint, but Wundt had no instruments that could study the real object of psychology, “mental life.” While he disparaged uncontrolled meditation as a method of study, he had to admit that “[conscious] movement resulting from inner impulse is a psychological process, the causes of which can in general be recognized only introspectively.” Introspection, in the context of rigidly controlled scientific experiments carried out by trained observers, was a vital part of examining the conscious process. He called his method of “experimental self-observation.” In *Principles of Physiological Psychology* (1873), Wundt explained that the task of the internal observer was to,

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22 Charles S. Myers, "Two Cases of Synaesthesia" *British Journal of Psychology* 7/1 (May 1914), 112-17.
Investigate those life processes [consciousness] that, standing midway between external and internal experience, [and] require the simultaneous application of both methods of observation, the external and the internal; and second, to throw light upon the totality of life processes from the points of view gained by investigations of this are and in this way perhaps to mediate a total comprehension of human existence . . . [This new science] begins with physiological processes and seeks to demonstrate how these influence the domain of internal observation.26

Skryabin has the same grandiose purpose in his journals - discovering life’s processes - and moreover, he seems to be consciously applying Wundt’s method of selbst-beobachtung. He clearly states his purpose in the journals from this perspective:

To produce an analysis of reality means to study the nature of my active consciousness, my free creativity. I must resort to that so-called psychological experience to clarify certain questions, because the process of the study of free creation is the process of self-observation.27

So, we will begin the study of the nature of free creativity, i.e. in other words the study of oneself, by introspection and by the investigation of the material we produce.28

The question of the study of the universe comes down to the question of the study of the nature of the activity of consciousness.29

Wundt created one of the earliest scientific studies of mental attention. His theory of apperception stated that the body constantly receives sensory stimuli from innumerable sources, simultaneously, but the mind selectively pays attention to one input at a time while ignoring the rest, which are processed in the background by the sub consciousness.30 He believed that this process of shifting attention to different sensory inputs was willful, and he called his theory voluntarism to

27 Производить анализ действительности значить изучить природу моего деятельного сознания, моего свободного творчества. Я должен буду прибегать к так называемому психологическому опыту для выяснения некоторых вопросов, так как процесс изучения свободного творчества есть процесс самонаблаждения. Skryabin, *Russkye Propile*, 160. (My translation)
28 Итак приступим к изучению природы свободного творчества, т. е. другими словами к изучению самого себя, к самонаблаждению к исследованию материала нами произведенного. Skryabin, *Russkye Propile*, 137. (My translation)
29 Вопрос изучения велененной сознания сводится к вопросу об изучении природы деятельности сознания. Skryabin, *Russkye Propile*, 177. (My translation)
distinguish it from other, contemporary schools that supported a passive separation between mind and body. Consciousness was far more complex than just sensory input and apperception, however. Mental life was formed through a process called “creative synthesis,” in which the mind was “an active entity that organized, analyzed, and altered the psychical elements and compounds of consciousness, creating experiences, feelings, and ideas.”

Wundt claimed that reality exists only through the lens of one’s senses, mediated by conscious processes that interpret sensory input. The world is, essentially, “all in your head” according to Wundt; even space and time are subjective constructs of the mind:

Sensation is the subjective form of our responses to external impressions; space and time rest on subjective laws of the synthesis of ideas; finally, the concepts of cause and substance . . . are of psychological origin. . . . Outer experience is a part of inner experience, it views the world as a reflection of consciousness.

Skryabin, fascinated by nineteenth-century philosophy, likely agreed wholeheartedly with this solipsistic and subjective view of reality, even before encountering Wundt. Taking the psychologist’s theories to heart, he seems to have become fascinated with the idea of voluntarism—it meant to him that the mind could take an active role in creating an individual’s reality. The idea of creating oneself was for Skryabin not only the ultimate paradox, but also the greatest opportunity. If one’s own consciousness is the stuff of fantasy, are we “nothing”? If we have the power to create a whole world in our minds, are we not equivalent to “God”?

Everything that exists, exists only in my consciousness. Everything that is my reality - that in turn is only what it creates. Therefore one cannot say that the world exists. In general, such concepts as existence do not completely express what constitutes the world. The world (time and space) is the process of my creativity, and moreover the word process (like the temporary concept of time) also does not express it satisfactorily. The world is my creation, which is the only world. One is relative to

another and nothing more. Nothing exists, nothing is created, nothing is realized: everything is game.  

This is the first appearance in his journals of what turns out to be a kind of mantra throughout, “I am nothing. I am only that which I create. I am God.” This statement has often been misunderstood as meaning that the composer believed believing himself a messiah, or literally the God of Christianity, and it has been quoted as supporting evidence for the composer’s “megalomania” or “psychopathology.” Such misinterpretations of Skryabin’s theories became commonplace in modern scholarship through Faubion Bowers’s biography of the composer, though Sabaneyev, who knew Skryabin personally and also read his journals, levels similar accusations of insanity (see Chapter 1). However dubious we may find Skryabin’s claims today, his journals, when examined in context, show a more-or-less logical extension and construction of theories based on contemporary psychological and philosophical research, influenced by popular religious movements. “Insanity,” albeit a relative term, is far too harsh an accusation. When Skryabin refers to himself as God, he likely means that he is the author of his own experiences.

Creation by Differentiation: The I and the Not-I

Wundt and other psychologists, then and today, recognize “differentiation” as a key component of the learning process. The act of distinguishing between a circle and a square, between different words, foods, and colors, are essential to early childhood development. Perhaps

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35 Все, что существует, существует только в моем сознании. Все есть моя деятельность, которая в свою очередь есть только то, что она производит. Потому нельзя сказать что мир существует. Вообще понятия существование, сущность, совершенно не выражают того, что представляет из себя мир. Мир (время и пространство) есть процесс моего творчества, причем слово процесс (как понятие временного) тоже не выражает того что нужно. Мир - мое творчество, которое есть только мир. Одно - относительно другого и больше ничего. Ничто не существует, ничего не создается, ничто не осуществляется: все игра.
Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 137. (My translation)


fascinated by Theosophy and other contemporary occult religions that stressed “unlocking hidden potential,” Skryabin further explored the idea of authoring oneself in terms of differentiation, relying more on his own self-observation. This departs considerably from Wundt’s theories. For Skryabin, differentiation is a constant. It is the act of distinguishing anything - physical, emotional, or conceptual, from another. This act of recognition is also one of analysis and creation in one’s “mental life.” For someone existing in the world of their own mind, if the past is not distinguished from the present, for example, time would simply cease to exist in that private universe. It is through countless acts of differentiation, according to Skryabin, that his consciousness constructs the world.

I must exist in the present moment to construct the past and future. . . . In order to differentiate, I must find myself in a given place at a given time. My past and future must be to me other than the present moment. . . . I am nothing. I am only that which I create (make). I want to create. . . . Creation is differentiation. 38

Each phenomenon is limitation by another thing and exists only as limitation. Each separate sensation is limitation. 39

My world, my life, my dream, my awakening! I create each of your moments to deny it in the following. I create you, denying everything, and in doing so I affirm everything, and you exist only in my creation, in the present, to live the future. 40

The composer acknowledges, and is troubled by, the fact that he is, himself, the author of his own experience but unable to control it. 41 He decides that one reason he does not have complete control over his mind is the limitations of his apperceptive abilities. His attention is only focused on

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38 Я должен существовать в настоящий момент, чтобы строить прошлое и будущее. . . чтобы различать, я должен находиться в данном месте и в данное время. Мое прошлое и будущее должны быть для меня другими, чем настоящий момент. . . . Я ничего. Я только то, что я создаю (творю). Я хочу создавать. . . Творчество -差异化.”
Skryabin, Ruskije Propile, 149 (My translation)

39 Каждое явление есть ограничение его другим и существует только как ограничение. Каждое ощущение отдельно есть ограничение
Skryabin, Ruskije Propile, 150. (My translation)

40 Мой мир, моя жизнь, моя мечта, мой рассвет! Я создаю каждое твое мгновение, чтобы отрицать его в следующем. Я создаю тебя, все отрицать и тем все утверждать, и существующий ты только в моем создании, в настоящем и жизнь будущим.
Skryabin, Ruskije Propile, 152. (My translation)

41 Skryabin, Ruskije Propile, 133.
one thing at a time, as in Wundt’s theory, and he does not have access to the rest of his mind. He divided his consciousness into the “I,” that which is sensed by him at any given moment, the part of his mind that differentiates, and the Not-I, everything he does not consciously sense, that which he does not differentiate. He hoped, through analysis of his conscious process, to gain access to the Not-I. To do so would be to take control of his unconscious creative process, and thus his personal universe:

I create not-I black and I white and I want to make the not-I white. In this is my free play.  
I have already created you many times, world . . . Unconsciously. Now I have risen to conscious creation. I created you, thinking that I study [you].

Skryabin also found that he was restricted by “coexisting wills.” Based on a system of differentiation in which nothing can exist without limitation by its opposite, he realized that individual minds must balance and limit one another. By recognizing that they are, individuals unwittingly differentiate their own consciousness from others, creating both themselves and everyone else. Together, these “closed spheres” of consciousness “dream” the world together, creating a shared reality, an “ocean of fantasy.”

You will be in me free and divine and I will be your God. You will be of me because I created you and I, you, because I am only what I have created. You will be of gods because I am god, I created you; I am nothing and I am what I have created.

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42 Я создал не-я черное и я белое и хочу не-я делать белым. В этом моя свободная игра. Skryabin, Russkie Prisile, 146. (My translation)
43 Я уже много раз создавал тебя, мир . . . без сознательно. Теперь же я возвысился до сознательного творчества. Я создавал его, думая, что я изучаю. Skryabin, Russkiye Prisile, 174. (My translation)
44 Skryabin, Russkiye Prisile, 190.
45 Вы будете во мне свободны и божественны, я буду Вашиим Богом. Вы будете мной, ибо я Вас создал, я и вы, ибо я только то, что я создал. Вы будете Божи, ибо я Бог, я вас создал; я ничто и я - то, что я создал. Skryabin, Russkiye Prisile, 152. (My translation)
The material from which the world is constructed is creative thought, creative imagination. Resorting to an analogy in nature, it is an ocean constructed of many drops, and each of them is exactly the same creative imagination as the ocean itself.\textsuperscript{46}

They [individuals] contemplate the same world - they also cannot leave the spheres of their consciousnesses. Therefore, on the one hand, I can establish a certain closed sphere of personal consciousness, and on the other, the connection between them as carriers of the common consciousness, called the universe. All of us, people, contemplate the world.\textsuperscript{47}

One of his goals was to experience his whole individual being at once, and the other was the coordination of other consciousnesses in the creation of a “unified consciousness.” This dream would form the basis of \textit{Prefatory Action} ten years later.

\textbf{Indifferentiation and Ecstasy}

How to awaken the individual and merge millions of minds?\textsuperscript{48}

Individual consciousnesses are also closed, inaccessible to my penetration. On one hand, reasoning honestly, I must deny everything outside the sphere of my consciousness because I can confirm only my sensations; reality is given to me only in psychological experiences. . . . On the other hand, there lives in me the conviction (which may seem unfounded), that my individual consciousness is only a drop in an ocean of such spheres, closed to one another.\textsuperscript{48}

Since the boundaries between individuals are created through differentiation - recognizing “I am” - to merge consciousnesses everyone would need to stop differentiating. When differentiation equates creation, indifferentiation, according to Skryabin, is literally “non-being”

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[46] Материя, из которой построен мир, есть творческая мысль, творческое воображение. Это прибегая к аналогиям в природе - океан, который состоит из множества капель, из которых каждая есть совершенно такое же творческое воображение, как и самый океан. Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 168. (My translation)
  \item[47] Они созерцают тот же мир, они также не могут выйти их сферы своего сознания. Итак с одной стороны я могу констатировать известную замкнутость сфер личных сознаний, а с другой связь их, как носителей общих состояний, называемых вселенной. Все мы, люди, созерцаем тот же мир. Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 184. (My translation)
  \item[48] Индивидуальное сознание, тоже замкнутая, не доступная моему проникновению. С одной стороны, честно рассуждая, я должен отрицать все, что вне сферы моего сознания, ибо я могу утверждать только мои ощущения, действительность дана мне только в психических переживаниях . . . С другой - во мне живет убеждение (которое может показаться неосновательным), что мое индивидуальное сознание есть только капля в океан таких же замкнутых, друг от друга отдельных сфер. Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 165. (My translation)
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
For Skryabin, such “non-being” was not only desirable, but a “divine” state that released individuals from their own, limited universes into one of complete possibility. He calls the moment of complete ind differentiation, where all humans become one, ecstasy. This sacred moment is likely referenced in Poem of Ecstasy, which he wrote simultaneously with these journals, and it is clearly played out at the end of Prefatory Action, when humanity “dissolves” into one another. Skryabin wrote in his journals,

Something began to flicker and pulse, and that something is one. It shivers and flickers, but it is one. I do not distinguish the multitudes. The one is only opposed by nothing - it is everything. I am everything.49

The highest synthesis is the divine synthesis, which in the last moment of being will include the universe and will allow it to experience harmonious awakening (ecstasy) and thus return it to a state of repose, non-being. This synthesis can be accomplished only by human consciousness, by the highest individuality that will appear as the central global consciousness, release spirits from shackles of the past, and will lure all living things into its divine creative flight. I speak of the final ecstasy, which is already near.50

The final moment is absolute differentiation and absolute unity - it is ecstasy. History is the aspiration towards absolute differentiation and absolute unity, i.e. the aspiration towards absolute originality and absolute simplicity.51

The dual nature of the universe according to Skryabin - the individual vs. the multiple, differentiation vs. ind differentiation, is its most salient aspect. The move from isolation and activity, to unity and repose was of the utmost importance to his cosmology. We currently exist in the

49 Ч то- то начало мерцать и биться, и это что- то одно. Оно дрожит и мерцает, но оно одно. Я не различаю множества. Это одно только противоположно ничего, оно - все. Я все.
Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 155. (My translation)

50 Высший же синтез есть тот божественный синтез, который в последний момент бытия включит в себя вселенную и даст ей пережить гармонический расцвет (экстаз) и таким образом вернет е е к состоянию покоя, небытия. Такой синтез может быть совершен только человеческим сознанием, высшей индивидуальностью, которая является центральным мировым сознанием, освободит дух от оков прошлого и увлечет в свой божественный творческий полет все живущее. Я говорю о последнем экстаз, который уже близко.
Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 171. (My translation)

51 Последний момент - абсолютная дифференциация и абсолютное единство - экстаз. История - стремление к абсолютной дифференциации и к абсолютному единству, т.е. стремление к абсолютной оригинальности и абсолютной простоте.
Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 181. (My translation)
undesirable state described on the left side of Figure 2.5, but to progress, we would move to the right side.

**Evolution and Involution**

Contemporary attitudes towards natural selection, social Darwinism, and evolution, also find their place in Skryabin’s system and progressive path. Even before Darwin’s time Western culture had an awareness of evolution from archeological finds, an understanding that organisms changed over time. The “Darwinian Revolution” added the concept of natural selection, and though Darwin himself did not apply his theories to humans, others did. For religious adherents in the late nineteenth century, the idea that creatures could be placed in a hierarchy of “fitness,” with humankind at the top, corresponded to pre-existent Christian attitudes. Finding significance in humankind’s position on the evolutionary scale became a faith of its own. Writers like Herbert Spencer believed evolution defined a new morality, one in which anything that benefitted the human species was virtuous. Many interpreted Darwin’s theories of natural selection as intelligent design, believing that all changes were fated and that the human race would continue to evolve according to a preordained plan.

In Skryabin’s system, struggle is the driving force of life and change, just as it is in Darwin’s theory of natural selection. In Skryabin’s system of opposing dualities evolution is produced by conflict between individuals or ideas, creating purpose and the will to differentiate. He often praises his “enemies” for investing him with the will and drive to exist. Struggle against one another empowers the species and spurs evolution toward the “divine.” Ultimately, however, to reach the highest evolutionary stage, everyone must enter a state of absolute repose in order to become One.

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Like many others of his time, Skryabin interprets evolution and natural selection as a pre-destined “path,” a teleological progression towards a goal.

![Progress/Evolution Diagram]

Figure 2.5. The dualities that constitute the universe, according to Skryabin’s Journals.

Life is, in general, a liberation in struggle, in activity. We want to suffer. . . . To live is to suffer.  

The being as a whole, that is, the entire history of the universe, can be considered an aspiration towards absolute being, i.e. towards ecstasy, to the borders of non-being, and represents the loss of consciousness, i.e., the return to non-being; thus history is expressed in the form of thought. The history of the universe is the growth of mankind’s consciousness to the all-embracing divine consciousness - it is the evolution of God.  

Prefatory Action was conceived as a way to help the human race along the evolutionary path, while Mysterium would have been the realization of the “summit” of evolution, a state of complete repose, a state outside the laws of natural selection. Interestingly, however, Skryabin did not think of

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54 Жизнь вообще есть освобождение в борьбе, в деятельности. Мы хотим страдания . . . желание есть страдание. Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 146. (My translation)  
55 Быть в целом, т.е. вся история вселенной, которая может быть рассматриваема как стремление к абсолютному бытию, т.е. к экстазу, граничащему с небытием и представляющему такой сказатель потерю сознания, т.е. возвращение к небытию, выраженной в форме мышления, история вселенной есть рост человеческого сознания до всеобъемлющего божественного сознания - она есть эволюция Бога. Skryabin, Russkye Propile, 170. (My translation).
evolution as moving continuously in one direction, but instead he believed that humankind would
“involve,” that is, become more primitive and attached to the material world, and then enter the
stages of evolution. In their books on the composer, both Boris de Schloezer and Viacheslav Ivanov
allude briefly to this idea. According to Skryabin, the chaos of World War I was a sign that
humankind was nearly done involving, and would soon begin to evolve. This circular progression is
fleshed out in more detail in the Prefatory Action libretto (Chapter 3). Ivanov describes Skryabin’s
ideas:

Destructive forces in their terrible unbridled debauchery were a signal for him the moment
of deepest involution (descent into chaos) which, served by the eternal primordial law, the
beginning of "evolution" (ascent towards unity).  

**Becoming the Thing-In-Itself: The Influence of Philosophy on Skryabin’s Evolutional Theories**

Since his early twenties, Skryabin had been fascinated by philosophy, finding in it, to some
extent, a replacement for his lost faith in the Christian religion. In fashioning his personal doctrine
and searching for a grander purpose for his music than mere entertainment, Skryabin drew not only
on Theosophical dogma, but also on the authority of nineteenth-century philosophy. The
composer’s journals, letters, and personal library show that he dedicated considerable energy to
philosophical study; the idealistic revelations in his journals and seemingly impossible goal for
Prefatory Action make more sense in context of these influences. I believe that Skryabin considered
himself an amateur philosopher, working, as his predecessors did, to refine and expand upon the
ideas of previous generations, in his case through the addition of psychological and Theosophical

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56 Разрушительные силы в их укасаемом разнудании знановали для него тот момент глубочайшей
"инволюции" (погружения в хаос), который служит, по непредложному первозданному закону, началом
studies to philosophical ones. Skryabin rarely mentions music in writings, though he clearly considered his theories applicable to his own compositions, since he claimed, for example, that his Symphony no. 3, *Divine Poem*, expressed “the emotional side of his philosophy of life.”

He apparently considered his philosophy complete and systematic enough to teach by the time he was in his early thirties. In his letters from 1904 on, he often describes lecturing on his personal philosophy to others. These letters make it clear that an understanding of German Romantic philosophy is a prerequisite to understanding his own theories. He wrote in a letter to his friend and patron Margarita Morozova:

> I am very pleased to learn that you are studying so much philosophy. You must grasp Kant as soon as possible and familiarize yourself a little with Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel—at least these ones in the history of philosophy . . . When you master all of this, it will be easy for me to study with you, and you will soon grasp my teachings.

In addition to the names Skryabin listed to Morozova in 1904, we can add other philosophical interests, based on the contents of his personal library. He owned general philosophical texts, such as *A History of New Philosophy from Kant to Nietzsche* (A. I. Zvedenokiy), *The Works of Plato, Inquisition into philosophy and Letters of Logic* (a collection of essays with a foreword by Skryabin’s personal acquaintance, G. Plekhanov), Spinoza’s *Ethics*, an expensive-looking copy of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as well as Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (all of these in Russian translation). In 1904 Skryabin attended the 11th International Philosophical Conference in Switzerland and acquired the published proceedings a year later. His marginal notes and marks in this book show his careful study and clarify his specific interests (see Figure 2.6).

58 “Мне очень приятно было узнать, что Вы много занимаетесь философией. Вам нужно как можно скорее усвоить Канта и познакомиться немного с Фихте, Шеллингом и Гегелем, хотя по истории философии . . . Когда все это усвоите, мне будет легко заниматься с Вами и Вы скоро воспримете мое учение.”

Aleksandr Skryabin, *A.N. Skryabin: Pis’ma*, e.d. A.V. Kashperova (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Muzyka, 2003), 307. (My translation)
Facing the Thing-in-itself: German Transcendentalism and Idealism

The four philosophers Skryabin named in his letter to Morozova, with the addition of Schopenhauer, formed the German Transcendentalist school, which is an ontology of knowledge, being, and experience, based on the works of Emmanuel Kant, specifically his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Skryabin’s own theories expound upon those explored in the written works of these philosophers.\(^{59}\)

Emmanuel Kant synthesized rationalism and empiricism, bridging the gulf between religion and science. Like Plato in the allegory of the cave (see Figure 2.7), Kant posited that we do not experience reality directly, only representations of it. He claimed that all we know of reality comes through the medium of our senses, and that we are incapable of realizing the world as it truly is. This true reality he called the “Thing-in-Itself” (*Ding an sich*).\(^{60}\) The Thing-in-Itself, according to Kant, is entirely unimaginable to humans because it exists beyond mind; only God could know the world as it really is. As Kant put it, “knowledge of the world is necessarily limited to the phenomena of appearance in the mind’s conception,” meaning that the thinking subject’s idea or conception of an object is what determines it.\(^{61}\) His ideas also highlighted the extreme isolation of the human condition; since life from this perspective is subjective, filtered through an individual’s bodily senses, one can never truly understand another’s experience.\(^{62}\)

While Kant did not propose that we actively create our own worlds, the next generation of German philosophers, Schopenhauer, Fichte, and Hegel, took his theories as a basis for this new direction.\(^{63}\) These philosophers built upon Transcendentalist philosophies, eventually becoming

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\(^{60}\) Ibid.


\(^{63}\) Solomon, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 209.
known as the German Idealist school. They entirely rejected the distinction between being and thinking and advanced new relationships between the self and the Thing-in-Itself. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) found that Kant had successfully divorced philosophy from its reliance on the external world, turning it inwards towards the perceiving subject, but Fichte wanted to further explore the role of this thinking subject. If nothing could exist without the mind’s recognition, then the Thing-in-Itself must also be a product of our conscious processes - “everything which occurs in our mind can be completely explained and comprehended on the basis of the mind itself.”

Fichte felt he could demonstrate that the self was the root of all knowledge, the ultimate a priori construct. His treatise Die Wissenschaftslehre (The Science of Knowledge) (1794), set out to explore Kant’s theories of the Thing-in-Itself as it related to the ego.

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Figure 2.6. An example of Skryabin’s annotations in the published proceedings of the Congrès internationale de philosophie, 11me session demonstrate his detailed study of German Idealist Philosophy. The first example comes from a paper by Xavier Leon titled “Fichte Contre Schelling” (Fichte Versus Schelling), and the second is by W. Kozlowski, “La Conscience et l’Énergie” (Consciousness and Energy).

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Schelling, originally Fichte’s student, also believed that the ego was the root of knowledge, but his theories differed from those of his teacher in that he believed that nature and the spirit could explain the construction of the Self.\textsuperscript{66} Hegel, as a philosopher, was much more oriented towards exploration of society, describing the relationship between Kant’s transcendentalist ideas, society, and morality. He believed that the “absolute spirit” could be understood only by considering the human mind as part of a larger society that was in a state of constant development through synthesis.\textsuperscript{67}

![Figure 2.7. An illustration of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” which shows a person perceiving objects indirectly as shadows on a cave wall. According to Plato, only philosophers could leave the “cave” and explore reality directly (though this is not true of Kant’s theory of the \textit{Ding an sich}).\textsuperscript{68}]

Though Schopenhauer is not always included with the German Idealist School, his treatise \textit{The World as Will and Representation}, also draws heavily on Kant’s philosophy. His theories focused on the distinction between the world as it was represented in the mind, and how it might exist in the Thing-in-Itself. Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer (though an infamous pessimist) optimistically believed

\textsuperscript{66} Lindsay James, “The Philosophy of Schelling” \textit{The Philosophical Review} 19/3 (May, 1910), 260.  
\textsuperscript{68} This illustration is used with permission from Brian Hafer - \textcolor{blue}{http://www.ihafer.com/cave.html}.  

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that humans had the potential to access some information about reality itself through art, and in some extreme mental states.  

The I Versus the Not-I: The Role of the Ego in the Creation of Experience for Fichte and Skryabin

Fichte asserted that there was an intellectual “intuition” concerning the ego’s activity, an awareness that the self plays a role in its own experience of reality (which is, to some extent, a kind of Romantic irony). The self was nothing but activity, Fichte claimed, and moreover the ego creates itself but is unaware that it does so, in the same way that a sleeper simultaneously and unconsciously creates and participates in their own dream. This is evidenced by the ego’s ability to self-reflect; it becomes both the subject - by thinking - and the object - by being thought of.

Fichte’s division of the self into two parts, which he called the “I” and the “Not-I,” related respectively to activity and limitation. No activity could exist without limitation, so the self, which was pure activity, must also be limited. The Not-I, or the “absolute I,” for Fichte, was the inactive, unconscious, and thus the infinite portion of the ego. According to Fichte’s theories, these two parts of the self balanced and completed each other; their relationship was the root of experience. This was the basis of Fichte’s “Category of Limitation,” which was necessary for the creation of all human experience.

The ego is to determine itself. But the Ego is in essence nothing but activity. Hence, it must limit one of its acts; and, because it is nothing but activity, it must limit the act by another opposite act.

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71 Ibid., 12.
72 Heinrich Dieter, Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 195.
Not only do Skryabin’s journals demonstrate a clear borrowing from Fichte’s theories concerning the division of the self and the ego’s creation of experience, but Skryabin even uses Fichte’s terminology, most obviously the “I” and “Not-I” (in Russian the Ya (Я) and the Ne-Ya (Не-Я). Skryabin writes in his journals,

I am my activity, determined by my relationship to the world outside of me.\textsuperscript{74}

I also affirm my activity. In order to think and feel, in order to create the world, I make an effort, I act. If I cease my activity, I will die or fall asleep. With the termination of the activity of my consciousness everything disappears for me. Thus, the world is the activity of my consciousness.\textsuperscript{75}

Fichte and Skryabin both considered differentiation an action from which all experience and reality stemmed.

\textbf{Schopenhauer and Skryabin: Unity and the Role of Art in Evolution}

Many of the ideas that came out of the German Idealist School were essentialist ones, resulting in overarching theories of unity and progress. These compelling theories of the fundamental unity of man found their way into Skryabin’s doctrine alongside contemporary Theosophical and psychological theories. Skryabin would come to believe, like Kant, that a world experienced through human senses is a subjective and isolated one, but unlike Kant, he came to believe that there was the potential to move beyond the boundaries of the world as it related to the senses, which would be to progress to a state he equated with God. This idea, that there is an essential unity to all life, was famously espoused by Arthur Schopenhauer in his magnum opus, \textit{The World as Will and Representation} (1818).

\textsuperscript{74} Я - моя деятельность, определяемая моим отношением к внешнему для меня миру.
Skryabin, \textit{Russkiye Propieli}, 167-68. (My translation)

\textsuperscript{75} Ещё я утверждало мою активность. Чтобы мыслить и чувствовать, чтобы создавать мир, я делаю некоторое усилие, я действую. Если прекратится моя активность я усну или умру. С прекращением деятельности моего сознания для меня исчезает всё. Итак мир есть активность моего сознания.
Skryabin, \textit{Russkiye Propieli}, 177. (My translation)
Schopenhauer believed that the world existed in two forms: the first is as a subjective experience in the mind of an individual, which he called the world as Representation (again, similar to Plato’s “allegory of the cave”); the second form of the world was Will, which he roughly equated with the Thing-in-Itself. Schopenhauer defined The Will as a “monstrous, blind, urging, unindividuated force or power, or endless directed striving.”76 Whereas the world as Representation is individual, the world as Will is characterized for us by an essential unity common to all life, which was activity through strife and suffering. Fichte and Schelling also had similar positions on the essential unity of life. Schelling believed that “all artistic, scientific, and social phenomena are in various ways emanations of a single entity, the absolute.”77

The concept of an essential unity underlying all human life was, of course, the main tenet of Skryabin’s personal doctrine, and to realize it was the ultimate goal of Prefatory Action. By overcoming differences present only in an individual’s representation of the world, such as time, space, and the physical body, one’s consciousness could evolve to reach the otherwise unimaginable Thing-in-Itself, an infinite state (as in Fichte’s theories) where there could be no limitation of the individual I and moreover no representational experience. Skryabin’s writings in his journals on the Universal Consciousness and God were strikingly similar to Schopenhauer’s concept of The Will. Skryabin wrote,

The universal consciousness, as such, experiences nothing, it is life itself, it thinks nothing, it is thought, it does nothing, it is action itself. God, is a state of consciousness . . .

78 Универсальное сознание, как таковое, ничего не переживает оно есть сама жизнь, оно ничего не мыслит, оно сама мысль, оно ничего не делает, оно сама деятельность. Бог, как состояние сознания Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 188. (My translation)
The libretto describes the return to God as an embrace of the infinite and all-encompassing unity among all beings. Schelling also compared the concept of absolute unity (in nature) to God. Where Skryabin departs from most nineteenth-century theories of unity and will is in his conviction that it is an attainable state.

Skryabin, like the Idealists, believed that internal investigation of one’s own thoughts was the most effective method of discovering knowledge of the constitution of the world. Schopenhauer believed that in certain heightened mental states one could gain knowledge of the Will (Thing-in-Itself); like Fichte and Schelling, he believed that the Thing-in-Itself has an intrinsic connection to the human mind. Schopenhauer wrote,

I have stressed that other truth that we are not merely the knowing subject, but that we ourselves are also among those realities or entities we require to know, that we ourselves are the thing-in-itself. Consequently, a way from within stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate from without. It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken by attack from without.  

Skryabin also carried out this internal exploration in his journals as a means to define the nature of the universe and what he called “free creation” in order to unlock human potential and illuminate a path towards the divine.

Skryabin and Schopenhauer were also united in their belief that art is the medium through which we can acquire knowledge of the world outside our senses. Schopenhauer believed that knowledge of the Will could be gained by suppressing one’s individual will, which preoccupied the mind with temporary and immediate desires that stood as obstacles to understanding the world beyond our senses. One way to reach such a state was through suffering, as saints did through a hermetic lifestyle. Another, more fleeting method was to lose oneself in deep aesthetic

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contemplation, which would dissolve the subject-object distinction in the individual will.

Schopenhauer believed that artists, though they did not know it, communicated The Will through their artwork.\(^80\) Schopenhauer wrote in *The World as Will and Representation*,

> Thus the work of art so greatly facilitates the apprehension of the Ideas in which aesthetic enjoyment consists; and this is due not merely to the fact that art presents things more clearly and characteristically by emphasizing the essential and eliminating the inessential, but just as much to the fact that the absolute silence of will, required for the purely objective apprehension of the nature of things, is attained with the greatest certainty.\(^81\)

Schopenhauer contended that art forms could be arranged in a hierarchy; the more representative mediums, such as architecture, were the lowest, whereas the most ephemeral art form, music, was the least representational and thus directly communicated the world as Will.\(^82\) Nietzsche, in his article “Schopenhauer as Educator,” noted that Schopenhauer’s insistence that we had the potential to learn about the world outside the realm of sensation, gave humanity, specifically artists, a mission - “to promote the production of the philospher, the artist, and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature.”\(^83\) Schopenhauer’s work was particularly inspiring to Romantic artists, painting them as “existential heroes” with access to secret knowledge, much in the manner in which Skryabin liked to represent himself. Skryabin’s article on art World War I depicts artists as directing the human race from the periphery of society.\(^84\)

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\(^81\) Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 370.

\(^82\) Jacquette, “Schopenhauer’s Metaphysics of Appearance, 16.


\(^84\) A. N. Skryabin, Pis’ma A. N. Skryabinu: v Fondakh Gosudarstvennyovo memoral’novogo muzeya A. N. Skryabina, ed. O. M. Tompakova (Saint Petersburg: Kompositor Saint Petersburg, 2010), 104.
God is Dead: Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In his theories on morality and evolution Skryabin took many of his ideas from Nietzsche’s innovative monograph *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a book the composer owned. The book was particularly popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the esoteric and allegorical writing style relates to the Symbolist penchant for ambiguity.\(^85\) Nietzsche’s primary assertion in this book is that humans as they are in the nineteenth century are not consummate organisms, but merely a “bridge” between the ape and the “superman.” The book is organized as a series of lectures and meditations, designed to explore stubbornly entrenched religious and moral assumptions that limit social development and individual freedom.\(^86\) Both *Zarathustra* and Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action* attempted to identify and correct the flaws of modern humans in order to bring about the next stage of evolution. Nietzsche considered this “evolution” a cultural one,\(^87\) however, whereas Skryabin seems to envisage not only a spiritual realization but a physical one as well, in which humans would leave behind their bodies for a collective, incorporeal existence.

Nietzsche and Skryabin also shared common ground in their view of God. With the sensational statement “God is dead,” Nietzsche meant that humans no longer have a need for the concept of God but can rely on their own empirical reasoning and logical morality instead of religious law.\(^88\) With Skryabin’s famous mantra in his journals, “I am God. I am Nothing. I am that which I create,” he meant that he was the author of his own experience as well as unconsciously the creator of the Thing-in-Itself.

The figure of The Prophet in Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action* libretto (discussed in Chapter 3) begins by sowing chaos and strife, but then flees into the desert, where he conquers his fear of

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 19.
death. Returning to humanity with the goal of education, he is killed by the ignorant masses. The Prophet might be interpreted as a Jesus figure, or even a reference to Orpheus, but in light of Skryabin’s interest in Nietzsche we might also note the parallels between The Prophet and Zarathustra. In Nietzsche’s book, Zarathustra is a hermit who comes down from the mountains to preach change to the masses, though he is mostly ignored by them. Zarathustra’s task is not only an altruistic journey, but a personal one; by taking in new experiences outside his normal isolation, he descends into society to rise above its flaws, just as the sun goes beyond the horizon to rise again. Nietzsche called this process “going-under” (untergehen), one of extreme self-exploration, often painful, in the name of enlightenment. Skryabin’s journals I believe, represent Skryabin’s personal going-under. As Zarathustra came down from the mountain in order to raise up both himself and his fellow man, so too did Skryabin undertake profound inner exploration with the ultimate goal of assisting humanity in its evolution. Beginning around 1904, based on the doctrine he developed from his studies of Theosophy, psychology, and philosophy, Skryabin considered his compositions altruistic in nature, capable of spiritually educating and evolving listeners. His ultimate dream for mankind was a going-under through art, a transformational, evolutionary process.

The Occult, Theosophy, and World War I

Though today Skryabin is known for (and for some, even defined by) his “eccentric” beliefs, during his lifetime he was one of thousands of sympathetic spiritual scholars during the Russian “golden age” of occultism. Today much of the research undertaken by occult societies during the fin-de-siècle may seem absurd or naive, such as the positivistic, “scientific” explorations of spiritual phenomena, and the unshakable conviction that ancient peoples knew more about the construction of the cosmos than those in the modern era. It is easy to disdain the “pseudoscience” of previous ages, when their beliefs have been disproven or have fallen out of fashion; there can be no doubt
that every century (including the present one) has similar pseudosciences, widely acknowledged only in retrospect. This section examines the esoteric religious influences that informed the composer’s vision for Prefatory Action, historically situating occult studies in the fin-de-siècle, explaining occult doctrines, connecting art to esoteric religions, and positing symbolic connections to the Prefatory Action libretto.

Skryabin likely did not discover occult studies until he was in his thirties, though he had been a spiritually-minded person since childhood. An early note (ca. 1888) that the composer penned as a teenager and placed in his Grandmother’s Bible shows that he was once a passionate Christian:

How should we, obliged to Him for all our happiness, treat him? We should happily raise the standard of Christ and proudly say, "we are Christians." We will bear this holy image of the suffering of Christ and dwell in him, in his teachings, in him and our unity with the true and eternal God.  

In a diary entry twelve years later, however, Skryabin seemed disillusioned with the Orthodox faith. Boris de Schloezer’s memoirs claim his faith was tested and broken when he severely injured his hand while studying piano at the Moscow Conservatory. Skryabin wrote in 1900,

It is not by your will that I came into this world . . . In tender youth, full of false hopes and wishes, I admired your radiant charm and I waited for a revelation from heaven, but revelation never came.

Skryabin seems to have first become interested in occult studies with the start of his relationship with Tat’yana de Schloezer; by 1905 he was reading popular occult literature. He wrote to Tat’yana that same year, “I am reading an interesting book: La Clef de Théosophie by [Helena] Blavatsky . . . [It] is a remarkable book. You will be surprised at the similarity between its ideas and my own.” Though he was not a registered member of the Theosophical Society, the most

89 Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 120.
91 Ibid., 120.
92 Skryabin, A.N. Skryabin: Pis’ma, 367, 369.
influential occult society of his time, he maintained a close circle of friends with Theosophical ties and occult interests, and he presumably attended their regular study groups after he began to reside in Moscow more or less permanently in the 1910s. Skryabin’s private library, preserved at the Scriabin Museum in Moscow as it was at the time of his death in 1915, contains at least twenty-three books on religious and occult subjects ranging from practical magic and hypnosis, through treatises on Spiritualism and Theosophy, to ancient Hindu religious texts. He was also a regular subscriber to three occult journals, *Vestnik Teosofii* (The Herald of Theosophy), the main journal of the Theosophical Society in Russia, *La Revue Théosophique: Belge*, and *Novoye Zveno* (*New Link*, a Theosophical journal).

### The Occult as Scholarship

The word occult comes from the Latin word “occulere,” meaning “hidden.” “Occultism” and “esotericism” are two terms frequently applied to the popular wave of unorthodox Western religions that emerged during the *fin-de-siècle*, though many of these groups, far from “hiding” their beliefs, published, advertised, and proselytized, spreading their knowledge and enlarging their membership for what they believed was the common good. The "hidden" or “esoteric” nature of these belief systems rested upon the knowledge used to construct their doctrines, which they believed were "truths" gleaned from ancient texts or modern science that were previously unknown to mainstream religions. Some of the most successful occult societies and beliefs of the time, aside from Theosophy, were Rosicrucianism, Anthroposophy, Spiritualism, Transcendentalism, Hypnotism, and Freemasonry.93

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Throughout the nineteenth century, scientific advances had consistently brought religion and science into conflict. As Maria Carlson observes in *A History of The Theosophical Movement in Russia*, the rapid onslaught of scientific developments from the second industrial revolution, coupled with the waning influence of religious institutions in matters of state created, for many, a spiritual void. Major scientific developments such Darwin's theories of natural selection stubbornly contradicted long-standing religious dogmas. Esoteric religions offered an appealing middle path between these two disparate worlds; in the words of Helena Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society (1875), the society offered a "synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy." This all-embracing worldview was wildly popular in its time, especially for artists in France, Russia, and America.\(^{94}\)

The novel and flexible nature of the occult captured the imagination of a generation. The birth of the golden age of esotericism corresponded with the emergence of comparative religious studies.\(^{95}\) Many occult doctrines adopted a holistic approach to religion, synthesizing common features of different beliefs across the world and throughout time.\(^{96}\) There were certainly more popular forms of the occult based in folk culture, though these tended to focus on more mundane matters, such as cursing enemies or getting rich. A distinction should be drawn between folk-based practices and the occult as a scholarly pursuit. In many cases esoteric, spiritual doctrines were pursued by discerning intellectuals, philosophers, and artists from the middle classes and aristocracy. Intellectuals saw occult religions as a means of furthering their knowledge of the universe and improving themselves, and for artists the new religions provided templates for creative output. Unlike many mainstream belief systems, which accepted a pre-determined cosmology, world-view, and set of morals, scholars of the occult were not handed down a set of rules to follow, nor was the

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\(^{96}\) Ibid.
whole of their system of knowledge pre-determined. These religions grew and changed with the participatory research and publications of its members; they were religions for the modern man. American Theosophist Irving Cooper summed up the participatory nature of occult religions in 1915 when he explained that each scientific discovery increased one's understanding of the world the same as any religious truth, and if the two fields appeared to contradict each other, it was only because there is some aspect of the issue that is not yet understood, a discovery yet to be made. The Theosophical mantra, "no religion higher than truth," reflects the most famous occult group’s intellectual position. Western esotericism was not so much a religion as an attitude in which each individual was a scholar pursuing spiritual and cosmic knowledge without excluding any religion or scientific field of study.

The “Golden Age” of Occultism in Russia

Modern Occultism did not fully take root in Russia until the early twentieth century, though the occult revival had begun earlier, its epicenter in France. In the late nineteenth century well-traveled, bi-lingual Russian intellectuals brought new French religious ideas to their homeland, sometimes translating and publishing occult texts despite publication restrictions. Though occult practices were not technically legal in Russia, they were unofficially condoned by the activities of Tsar Nicholas II, a mystic at heart, who brought famous French writers to his court, such as Papus (a.k.a. Gerard Encausse), author of L’Occultisme Contemporain (1887), La Science des Mages (1892), Traité Méthodique de la Magie Pratique (1898).

Skryabin spent much of the early 1900s in Paris and spoke French fluently, so he was able to experience the occult craze firsthand and may have met with like-minded French thinkers and

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writers. So many of his letters have been lost that it is difficult to determine many of his Parisian contacts, though we do know he was close with at least one French mystic. His friend Jean Delville painted the frontispiece for the publication of *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* (see Figure 2.8). The painter was closely associated with both the French Symbolist painters and Josèphin Peládan’s Rosicrucian Society, which, with a doctrine strikingly similar to Theosophy, literally worshipped art as God, viewing progress in aesthetics as a means of evolution for the human race.\(^9\) Skryabin met with Delville while he was working on *Prefatory Action* in 1914, telling the artist about his plans for a trip to India.\(^10\)

Occultism did not gather a large following in Russia until around 1905, and it reached its height of popularity in 1915. Though the royal family had been interested in esoteric religions and folk practices for generations (most infamously with the Rasputin scandal), the rest of the country faced religious restrictions from the Orthodox Church in addition to government censorship. In 1905, however, the crippling failure of the Russo-Japanese war, coupled with a bloody country-wide revolt considerably weakened imperial authority, resulting in a constitutional monarchy and the creation of the Duma, an elected council with the power to check the tsar’s authority.\(^11\) New privileges for the press resulted in the translation and publication of thousands of books of French and English occult texts, as well as the foundation of many Russian occult journals, beginning the “golden age” of modern occultism in Russia. As new interests in ancient texts and lore in Gnosticism, ancient Hermeticism, Kabbalism and Rosicrucianism resurfaced, hundreds of occult societies were established in major cities for thinkers to meet and discuss their discoveries, both officially and unofficially. After the Revolution the Bolsheviks quickly banned the occult societies,


\(^10\) Skryabin, *A. N. Skryabin: Pis’mo*, 622.

abolished the journals, and confiscated occult literature, effectively putting an end to popular interest in the subject in Russia.  

Theosophy: History and Doctrine

The etymology of the word “theosophy” comes from the Greek theos and sophia, meaning “divine wisdom.” When used as a proper noun, “Theosophy” refers to the formal society founded by Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Olcott in New York, 1875.  

While Skryabin had many occult interests, ranging from philosophical to practical magic studies by Papus, he seems to have associated himself most closely with the Theosophical Society, the most influential and well-known occult organization of his time. He owned all five volumes of the society's seminal text, The Secret Doctrine, heavily annotating the margins in his own hand.

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102 Carlson, No Religion Higher than Truth, 21-22.
103 Ibid., 29.
104 Helena Blavatsky wrote the first two volumes of The Secret Doctrine, but the last three volumes were written after her death by her successor, Annie Besant. Besant’s additions were highly controversial within the society, and many Theosophs (even today) consider only Blavatsky’s writings to be legitimate.
Helena Petrovich Blavatsky led a liberated life, rife with scandal. During her youth in Russia she was a well-known spiritual medium who left her husband after a brief marriage to travel Europe. She became a prolific authority on sensational spiritualist phenomena in France before traveling to America where she met Henry Olcott, who was also interested in spiritualism. Their popularity skyrocketed with the publication of Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

Figure 2.9. The official symbol and slogan of the Theosophical society, “There is No Religion Higher than Truth.” The image is an amalgamation of sacred symbols from five ancient religions.

Shortly after Blavatsky and Olcott established Theosophical headquarters in India, the Society was rocked with a series of scandals in 1884. Blavatsky’s disgruntled ex-assistants publicly claimed that the celebrated medium’s miracles were hoaxes, performed with the help of trap doors and mirrors, and a number of mysterious letters supposedly written by unseen Indian gurus were found to be written in Blavatsky’s own hand. Though the claims were extremely damaging to the Society’s image, it was ultimately able to weather the crisis and managed to remain relevant after the leader’s death in 1891.\footnote{Theosophists today believe she was traveling in India and Asia during this time, but these claims are unsubstantiated. Carlson, *No Religion Higher than Truth*, 43.} \footnote{Ibid.}

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106
Throughout her career as a medium Blavatsky did not often visit Russia, but she worked with her sister to ensure she maintained a successful legacy in her homeland.\textsuperscript{107} When Skryabin came to know the Theosophical society, it had just managed to distance itself from the scandals surrounding Blavatsky’s life, becoming widely accepted in Russia for the first time.\textsuperscript{108}

![H.P. Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, founders of the Theosophical Society.](image)

Official chapters of the Society were established in St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1902 and 1906 respectively, and by 1914, when Skryabin was working on \textit{Prefatory Action}, Theosophy was at the height of its popularity in Russia.

\textsuperscript{107} This legacy was strengthened (ironically) by the famous Russian philosopher and writer, Vladimir Solov’ev (1853-1900) who had some similar ideas to her philosophies, but vehemently attacked the premises of her books. His works became associated with the movement in Russia after his death. Carlson, \textit{No Religion Higher than Truth}, 49.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 47.
One of the underlying premises of Theosophy, according to Blavatsky, is the assumption that generations of greedy religious and political institutions in the West have warped religious texts and doctrines, making mainstream religions unreliable without points of comparison.\textsuperscript{109} Theosophy is an exceptionally holistic faith that, based on Blavatsky’s “scholarship,” maintains that there are a series of core truths upon which all religions are based. Each religion offers small parts of the great truth that explains the makeup of the human spirit and the cosmos, but this “truth” can only be understood by bringing together many different beliefs in order to discover the whole picture.

Theosophy considers all religions essentially true, and it asserts that any contradictions between their details is the result of corrupted translations or misinterpretations by the greedy. This approach allows devotees of all religions to maintain their faith while exploring Theosophical ideas; contrary to popular belief, Christianity and Theosophy are not at all mutually exclusive.\textsuperscript{110} Annie Besant, president of the European Theosophical Society during Skryabin’s lifetime wrote,\textsuperscript{111}

\begin{quote}
[Theosophy] as the origin and basis of all religions . . . cannot be the antagonist of any; it is indeed their purifier, revealing the valuable inner meaning of much that has become mischievous in its external presentation by the perverseness of ignorance and the accretions of superstition; but it recognizes and defends itself in each, and seeks in each to unveil its hidden wisdom. No man in becoming a Theosophist need cease to be a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu; he will but acquire a deeper insight into his own faith, a firmer hold on its spiritual truths, a broader understanding of its sacred teachings.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

Theosophy’s holistic nature also encouraged exploration of other occult practices. As Maria Carlson explained,

\begin{quote}
From the Theosophical point of view, an enlightened individual could lay out the Tarot on Tuesday night, participate in sectarian ecstasy on Wednesday, speak to his
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{111} Besant’s leadership of the theosophical society was the source of a lot of strife and schisms within the society. Many Theosophists in the early twentieth century disliked her involvement with colonialist politics (specifically, the English presence in India), and many more began to doubt her when she proclaimed a young Indian child the new Messiah. (Carlson, No Religion Higher than Truth, 32). Skryabin, was at least aware of Besant, since had at least four of her publications in his personal library.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 30.
Theosophical circle on Thursday, and receive the Eucharist on Sunday with no violence done to his inner convictions. Theosophy as a system catered to the eclectic spirit of the age.\textsuperscript{113}

The main sources of Blavatsky’s cosmology were Buddhist and Hindu texts; these were supplemented by Greek mystery religions, the Bible, the Torah, the Qur’an, and other research publications. In her doctrine these religious sources were balanced nearly equally with scientific sources, including archaeology, psychology, philosophy, and evolutionary theory, the last of which played a particularly important role.

Blavatsky claimed that there was one essential reality/consciousness from which everything in the universe originated. The creative thoughts of this consciousness are transformed into matter as they travel through the seven planes of existence, beginning with the most ephemeral and infinite and ending in the material world.\textsuperscript{114} These seven planes are:

7. Divine  
6. Monadic  
5. Spiritual  
4. Intuitional  
3. Mental  
2. Astral  
1. Physical\textsuperscript{115}

Each human being is a spark of this all-encompassing consciousness that has traveled through the planes and arrived, clothed in matter, in the material world. Each human spirit, as well as the entire human race perpetually undergoes a series of complex evolutionary processes and reincarnations in a preordained cycle that travels from a collective, divine consciousness, to a state of separated, individual minds in the physical plane, and back to the unified consciousness again in the divine plane. Reaching this state of divine unity was the Theosophists’ ultimate goal. They

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 114-16.  
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 121.
interpreted the modern, technical age of industry and scientific development as the point of maximal descent into physical matter, from which, optimistically, the race could only go up towards the mental and spiritual worlds. Humans needed to evolve spiritually in order to reach these higher planes - thus the mission of Theosophy. By spreading knowledge of the goal and workings of the universe, they could speed and aid humans’ journey to divine unity. As with Hinduism, karma plays a major role in reincarnation, and thus the more spiritual and morally secure people are eventually reincarnated in worlds closer to the divine.116

The Theosophical universe is balanced and symmetrical on both a micro and macro level. Just as the soul goes through cycles of action and repose - life/death/rebirth - the universe is created and destroyed regularly after long periods of time, alternating periods of chaos with activity. Blavatsky often referred to Hindu cosmological cycles of measurement, focusing especially the manvantara - a cycle that Blavatsky estimated would take 4,320,000,000 years. In each manvantara, solar systems, planets, kingdoms of nature, and even races of mankind go through a series of incarnations. Blavatsky claimed it was (and still is) the age of the Slavic race, and that it was their cosmic duty to help mankind progress towards the next incarnation.117 Blavatsky likely considered this last detail a self-referential prophecy, though Skryabin may have interpreted this as a “call to arms”; both Sabaneyev and Schloezer speak of Skryabin’s sometimes overpowering sense of duty towards the human race and its spiritual growth.

Theosophical concepts immediately demonstrate marked connections to Skryabin’s philosophy as it was espoused in his journals. As in Skryabin’s psychological theories of consciousness, the concept of duality and balance plays a major role in this faith. In declaring that everything stems from one consciousness, all dichotomies in life become illusory. Maria Carlson’s

116 Ibid., 115-19.
117 Ibid., 117-18.
metaphor of a coin is a good one here: it has two sides and one cannot exist without the other, but they are still one coin. Blavatsky claimed that the most devious delusions were those of death and time, which were phenomena relegated only to the lowest plane of physical existence. As with most major religions, Theosophy eased the fear of death by explaining it as a release from the physical plane into more spiritual planes, and so, technically, a step closer to the divine.

These Theosophical concepts of planes, consciousness, and death, help explain the end of the Prefatory Action libretto. The participants perfectly describe the Theosophical objective of ascendance to the highest plane and unity with the all-consciousness. They become one mind, surrender all conception of time by embracing eternity, and abandon the physical plane by leaving earthly bodies and “dissolving.” Skryabin’s goal, in the final moments of this work was not to portray the death of the participants but to show their jubilant admission into the spiritual plane.

We will be born in the wind!
We will awaken in heaven! . . .
In the naked beauty
Of blazing souls
We will dissipate . . .
We will dissolve . . .

Blavatsky claimed that the end of a manvantara - and thus the beginning of a new age - would be marked by apocalyptic signs. The political unrest at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially the outbreak of World War I, was interpreted as such a sign, an indication that mankind had reached the zenith of materialism and would now enter a more spiritual age according to the

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118 Carlson, No Religion Higher than Truth, 125.
119 Theosophists today still celebrate the day of the White Lotus, May 8, as the holy day when Blavatsky died (a.k.a. switched planes).
120 В этом последнем миг совмещения, Вбросим мы вечности наших мгновений, В этом последнем звучи дыхом, Все мы растратим в идее эфирном, Родимся в идее, Пронесемся в небе, Смешаем чувства в волне единой!, И в блеске роскошном, расцвета полдневного, Являясь друг другу, В красе обнаженной, Сверкающих душ, Испещрён . . . . Растаём . . . .
Skryabin, Russkye Propilei, 231-235. (My translation) Skryabin’s ellipsis.
natural order of the cosmos. The idea that social unrest was natural, inevitable, and a sign of better times to come was comforting for Russian Theosophists, who experienced the Russo-Japanese war, the 1905 revolt, and the beginning of World War I within a decade. Moreover, such dramatic events shook people to their core, and Theosophists believed that times of unrest made people more spiritually aware, presenting an opportunity for Theosophical education.\textsuperscript{121} Annie Besant, president of the Theosophical Society, issued official and positive statements about war in 1914. War was evil, true, she said, but it was the result of the accumulated negative karma of the human race, and opportunities in battle to demonstrate courage, mercy, and brotherly alliances allowed for the amendment of this karma.\textsuperscript{122}

While such a welcoming attitude towards the chaos and violence of war might seem unusual, under the guidance of Blavatsky’s texts and Besant’s reassurances, it was shared by most Theosophists of the time and Skryabin was no exception. In January 1915 the St. Petersburg journal \textit{Muzyka} published an open letter by Skryabin to his friend Aleksandr Nikolayevich Bryanchaninov, "On the Connection between Politics and Art," in which the composer explained the responsibility of the intellectual community to humanity in light of the recent outbreak of World War I. He issues a call to artists to double their efforts to reach the masses, asserting that people will be more receptive to new ideas in troubling times. This letter reveals the composer's faith in evolution and his conviction that progress in art is essential to human development. Skryabin wrote that humanity would not mature through the actions of the masses but through the efforts of enlightened individuals on the outskirts of society: intellectuals, scientists, and artists, whose visions gradually trickled down to the public. This is an unusual attitude for him to adopt, politically. He was close friends with Georgii Plekhanov, a famous revolutionary leader and writer (and Skryabin owned

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 119-20.  
\textsuperscript{122} Carlson, \textit{No Religion Higher than Truth}, 78.
many of his books). Skryabin was likely in support of the growing revolution but, unlike others, he believed in the value of the intellectual elite (later condemned with the epithet "bourgeoisie") over the power of the working man and the masses. This stance is closer to Nietzsche's in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the ignorant masses are viewed merely as a trial for intellectuals to face on their path to the over-human.

During major catastrophes in human history, Skryabin explained, the masses were made more aware, susceptible to new ideas. Skryabin appealed to artists to redouble their efforts to synthesize different art mediums. *Prefatory Action* was Skryabin's contribution; while the composer was horrified at the thought of violence and bloodshed, at least it would make the public more sympathetic to his philosophies, which would eventually prepare them for *Mysterium*. I have translated Skyrabin's open letter here in full as it appears in *Pis'ma k A. N. Skryabinu*, ed O. Tompakova.

My dear friend! I cannot but express to you my excitement regarding the idea expressed in the last issue of "New Link" - these thoughts about the educational value of this war.

You expressed the idea, which I have contemplated for a long time, of the necessity of upheaval for the masses during certain periods, which refine man's organization and make him capable of perceiving more subtle vibrations, to which he answers until now. They are so deeply mistaken to see the war as only evil, as the result of accidental strife between nations. The history of the races is the expression of peripheral developments of central ideas, given to prophets in their consciousnesses, sensed by creator-artists in moments of inspiration but completely hidden from the masses.

The development of this idea is subordinated to the rhythm of individual accomplishments and periods of accumulated creative energy; influences in the periphery produce changes, which will accomplish the evolutionary movement of the races. These changes (cataclysms, catastrophes, wars, revolutions, etc.), rock people's souls, open them to the perception of ideas hidden behind external events. The circle closes, and the stage is completed.

Yet another achievement, yet another impression of creative ideas upon material. Now we are experiencing the moment of such a shift and this, in my eyes, is a sign of maturity and an eagerness to realize the attitude. And at this time I feel like crying out to all people capable of new perceptions, people of science and art who, until now, have seemed to be standing at the edges of society but in reality are unconsciously creating history. Now is the time to call upon them to create new forms and make new decisions concerning synthetic problems. These problems are still not fully realized, but only vaguely sensed in
the quests for complex experiences, for example, in inclinations artists have for the reunion of arts, which were separated long ago, and for the combination of fields that until now were completely alien to one another. An especially major development for audiences is produced by performances of works that have a basis in philosophical ideas and combine elements of different arts. I personally came to feel this clearly with the beautiful performance of "Prometheus" in Queens College in London. The public's delight touched me then and contemplating it now, I'm inclined to assign their reaction not just to the musical aspect, but to the combination of the music with mysticism.

A. Skryabin. 123

A war also figures prominently in Prefatory Action; given the self-referential nature of the story and the time in which it was written, it seems likely that the libretto is referring to World War I.

Exactly as in Besant’s and Skryabin’s statements, war is sinful and evil, a result of moral and spiritual decay:

We lost the link to heaven
We dispersed ourselves
We oppose one another
We conduct terrible wars. 124

123 Дорогой друг! Не могу не выразить тебе моего сочувствия по поводу высказанной тобой в последнем No. "Нового звена" мысли о воспитательном значении войны.

Ты выразил давно созревшему мне идее необходимости в известные сроки потрясений для масс, уточняющих организацию человека и делающих его способным к восприятию более тонких вибраций, чем те, на которые он до сих пор отвечал. Как глубоко ошибаются видящие в войнах только зло и результаты случайно возникших раздоров между народами. История рас есть выражение в периферии развития централизованной идеи, данной в сознании пророками, ощущаемой творцами-художниками в минуты вдохновения, но совершенно скрытой от масс.

Развитие этой идеи подчинено ритму частных достижений, а периодическое накопление творческих энергий, действуя на периферии, производят события, которыми свершается эволюционное движение рас. Эти события (катаклизмы, катастрофы, войны, революции и т. п.), потрясая души людей, раскрывают их восприятию скрытой за внешними событиями идеи. Замикается круг, и этап завершен.

Еще одно достижение, еще одно запечатление творческой идей на матери. Мы переживаем теперь момент именно такого события, и это в моих глазах признак созревшего и жаждущего воплотиться настроения. И в такое время хочется кликнуть всем людям, способным к новым постижениям, людям науки и искусства, до сих пор стоявшим как бы в стороне от общественной жизни, а на самом деле бессознательно творящих историю.

Настало время призвать их к созданию новых форм и решению новых синтетических задач. Задачи эти еще не осознаны до конца, но смутно ощущаются в искании сложных переживаний, в склонности, например, у художников в возвращении ранее дифференцированных искусств, к сочетанию областей, до сих пор совершенно чуждых одна другой. Особенно большой подъем у публики создает исполнение произведений, имеющих в основе философские идеи и сочетающие в себе элементы различных искусств. Мне лично ясно почувствовалось это при прекрасном исполнении "Прометея" в Квинс-колледже в Лондоне. Восторг публики, тогда так меня растрогавшие, я теперь, вдумываясь в смысл войны, склонен приписать не столько музыкальной стороне этого произведения, сколько сочетанию в нем музыки с мистикой.

A. N. Skryabin, Па́вла А. Н. Скрябина: в Фондах Гавардитяннова мемориального фонда A. N. Skryabina, ed. О. М. Tompakova (Saint Petersburg: Kompositor Saint Petersburg, 2010), 104. (My translation).

124 Сияь утратив с небесами; Мы рассеялись и сами; Друг на друга восстаём мы; Войны грозные ведем мы. Skryabin, Russkje Profile, 220. (My translation)
The only way to break the cycle of violence in the libretto is through spiritual education and by following moral leaders. After the Prophet has given up on killing and inculcating hatred into humanity, Death tells him that he must teach man about the cosmos. They must “raise a temple” and perform an “astral dance,” that is - perform the ritual that is Prefatory Action.

Theosophy and Early Twentieth-Century Art

Many of Blavatsky’s arguments in *The Secret Doctrine* hinge on the creative interpretation of ancient religious symbols. She writes on the importance of symbolic interpretation:

> All esoteric Societies have made use of emblems and symbols, such as the Pythagorean Society, the Eleusinian, the Hermetic Brethren of Egypt, the Rosicrucians, and the Freemasons. Many of these emblems it is not proper to divulge to the general eye, and a very minute difference may make the emblem or symbol differ widely in its meaning. The magical sigillae, being founded on certain principles of numbers, partake of this character, and although monstrous or ridiculous in the eyes of the un instructed, convey a whole body of doctrine to those who have been trained to recognize them.  

Since Theosophy was, to a great extent, influenced by semiotics and iconography, Symbolist writers and artists in the *fin-de-siècle* naturally latched onto it as an expressive medium and a source of (seemingly) legitimized symbols and tropes on which to draw. The cryptic terms, iconography, and metaphoric language that pervaded Theosophical texts were ripe for subjective individual interpretation, mixing archaeological scholarship with imaginative speculation. Thus, Theosophy resonated in particular with new, psychological approaches to art in the *fin-de-siècle*. Since ideas and emotions in Symbolist works were expressed indirectly through obscure cyphers (known sometimes only to the artist), layers of meaning in a painting or written work were subjective and required a personalized reading that might reveal as much about the audience as it did the author. Russian

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Symbolist writer Andrei Belyi, for example, infused his novels with "obvious" Theosophical references: recurring themes of duality, eternity, light and fire, a triangle, the sun, and more. Theosophical references were so embedded in the works of Russian Silver Age artists that they became almost impossible to understand without some knowledge of their seminal texts. Literary critic Ivanov-Razmunk (1878-1946) wrote,

The future historian of literature will undoubtedly have to undertake excavations into the multi-volume theosophy of our time; without this neither Andrei Belyi, nor Viacheslav Ivanov, nor the numerous “Zheozhii nulkov” of symbolism and pseudo-symbolism would be comprehensible. The psychologist and the historian will find more than a little to interest them in the study of this distinctive sect of our times; the literary historian cannot afford to pass it by.

Aside from Jean Delville, Skryabin was most closely associated with the Symbolist writers and poets of the Russian Silver Age of art (ca. 1894 -1920), which was a period of poetry and literature in the early 20th century, defined by trends such as Mysticism, Symbolism, Futurism, and Acmeism. Skryabin’s closest friends among the Russian Symbolists included Konstantin Bal’mont (1866-1949), Jurgis Baltrusaitis (1863-1944), and Skryabin’s particularly close friend, Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949).

After encountering one of Blavatsky’s early works on Indian Mysticism, The Voices of Silence, Konstantin Bal’mont, claimed Theosophy was “the morning star of my inner dawn.” After this discovery Theosophical references permeated his works until the end of the career. He and Skryabin had many of the same priorities in their works; Bal’mont himself described the motivation behind his poetry as “giving oneself to the universal.” Bal’mont’s sonnet, Elf, describes the author’s experience hearing Skryabin play his compositions on the piano.

First fairies toyed about with wisps of moonlight.
Female flats along with sharps most male,

126 Carlson, No Religion Higher than Truth, 9.
127 Ibid., 6.
Act out a kiss, but also pain’s travail.
As trifling fancies gurgle to the right.

And from the left burst forth the sounds of magic.
And Will sang out a cry of merging wills.
The shining Elf, who rules harmonic thrills,
Formed cameos engraved from sound and music.

These faces whirled within the soundful current.
They shined and sparked, reflections gold and steel.
Joy gone, they now a piercing sorrow feel.

And crowds passed by. And thunder boomed its song.
And God resembled man as if his double.
So did I see Scriabin at the piano.129

Like Skryabin’s libretto, the sonnet emphasizes the merging of individual consciousness/wills, and especially the synthesis of disparate senses. The “Elf,” or Skryabin himself, makes a visual “cameo” representation of himself in sound. At the end of the sonnet Skryabin has become godlike; through his music he has come closer to the Divine, like the Theosophical notion that art brings humans closer to the Divine Unity.

**Alexandra Unkovskaya: Color-Sound-Number**

Skryabin was not the first Russian artist to merge music and Theosophy. Music pedagogue Alexandra Unkovkaya (1857-1929) was a regular contributor to *Vestnik Theosofii* (Herald of Theosophy), writing prolifically on Wagner, music and philosophy, and synesthesia. Skyrabin was doubtless aware of her work - she lectured often on music in St. Petersburg and Moscow, covering topics including Theosophical visual imagery, and numerical symbolism. His private library contains the September 1912 issue of *Vestnik* with one of her major treatises on the subject of synesthesia and music, “Pis’mo of Muzike” (Letter about Music).

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Unkovskaya describes a system she calls tsvet-zvuk-chislo (color-sound-number), with the purpose of creating a holistic artistic experience that relates to Theosophical ideals of oneness. The techniques she describes are tools for musical appreciation (particularly for young children), but also a means of writing symbolically charged compositions. She assigns colors and numbers to the seven pitches of the scale, maintaining that the associations she has chosen are natural. Chromatic notes and fractions are easily achieved in this system with blended colors and shades. Octaves can also be represented by darker shades for the lower register, and lighter hues for the upper registers. The color associations are repeated every seven notes, but numbers do not reset at the octave and increase infinitely.\textsuperscript{130}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
COLOR & RED & ORANGE & YELLOW & GREEN & BLUE & DARK BLUE & PURPLE \\
\hline
SOUND NUMBER & DO/C & RE/D & MI/E & FA/F & SOL/G & LA/A & TI/B \\
\hline
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Unkovskaya’s original diagram from “Pis’mo o Muzike,” showing color, pitch and number associations and a translation of the original chart.}
\end{table}

Unkovskaya demonstrates how to turn visual imagery or even math problems into melodies. Most of her demonstrations involve finding the average of a tsvet-zvuk-chislo. For example, the average between C(1) and E(3) is \( \frac{1+3}{2} = 2 \). This turns into the melody C - E - F - D, and the colors red, yellow, green, orange.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{130} Alexandra Unkovskaya, “Pis’mo o Muzike” \textit{Vestnik Teosofii} 9 (September, 1912), 35-38.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
Using anecdotes from her childhood, she explains that memories and experiences involve all the senses, and that artwork should do the same:

People frequently ask how I created this method in my thoughts, and I must answer this question with a story - we need to go into the past. I'm there listening to music, the whole world of music, and I see a multitude of paintings and a sea of colors, radiant sunsets, mysterious blue nights, and pink mornings dawning, and I experience childhood. I remember colored glass, inserted in the lower sections below the window frames of the little wooden house where we lived with grandmother in the fall and winter, moving from the village in the provincial town. Maybe these pieces of glass, made to sing to the street in any weather, taught me to listen to the real colors and feelings of their sonorities.¹³²

In the same way that Symbolist writers and artists used symbols with layered meanings that would resonate with the audience, her method was also intended as a tool for incorporating spiritual and psychological meaning into music. With this holistic style of composition, composers could write, in sound, an image, a distance, a text, a memory, almost anything. Unkovskaya wrote, "everything we see has light, color, and touch. So the dandelions and comets and grass and everything sings a song of the universe together, and all of it is in harmony." Her method was also a way of interpreting the holistic nature of the universe, as it emanated from a single consciousness.¹³³

We cannot be sure to what extent Unkovskaya’s work influenced Skryabin; in fact, her color-pitch associations do not correspond to Skryabin’s in his *Prometheus* symphony, since nearly every source agrees that Skryabin organized his color-pitch system in a circle of fifths (see Figure 2.13).¹³⁴ At the very least, however, her work contextualizes *Prefatory Action* as a contemporary attempt to synthesize Symbolism, Theosophy, and musical composition. Her theories overlap with Skryabin’s in the sense that both create a “complete” artwork that uses as many senses as possible. They both view holistic art as a highly realistic as well as a spiritually educational experience for the audience.

¹³² Ibid., 38. (My translation)
¹³³ Ibid., 39. (My translation)
¹³⁴ This article was written two years after *Prometheus* premiered, but Unkovskaya had been lecturing on her method for years before she began publishing it.
Unkovskaya’s description of the complete experience of memory is strikingly similar to Marina Skryabin’s description of her father’s conception of *Mysterium*.

This total artwork should be on a superior, liturgical plane, an image of life. In the life of a flower, for example, it is not a single living organism without the colors, the perfume, the light that allows us to see it, elements which will be reunited to form the flower, but all these elements and many more - the softness of the petals, the delicacy of the leaves - constitute the essence of the flower. It will be the same with the Mystery [Mysterium]. It is why the liturgy is more than a synthetic form like ballet or opera, but demonstrates one idea.\(^\text{135}\)

**Greek Mythology and the Harmony of the Spheres**

Skryabin was fascinated by Greek mythology, and much of the contemporary archaeological research on Greek religious rituals has strong correspondences to *Prefatory Action* and the concept of *Mysterium*.

Francisco Moreno, a philologist, has made significant strides in connecting Skryabin’s ideas to Greek mythological symbolism as well as Boethius’ categories of music in his article “Scriabin and Plato’s Musical Mysticism.”

Moreno shows that much of the libretto seems to generally reference concepts of *musica mundana*, the harmony of the spheres, and *musica humana*, the harmony governing the physical body as well as laws in human society. In the libretto, when humans first begin to discover sin and warfare, we find that consonance is a metaphor for truth - “the people, searching for consonant sonorities, touch the strings that are alien to them.”\(^\text{136}\) Dissonance also appears to be a metaphor for disturbance and conflict in human society, described in the libretto in detail as the “song and dance of the fallen.”\(^\text{137}\) The libretto is also saturated with ancient Greek imagery, such as the “sun’s lyre,”


\(^{137}\) Ibid., 28.
Figure 2.12. Unkovskaya’s diagram of number and pitch associations. At the very top are colors, followed underneath by solfege (this corresponds to the previous example), and below these are numbers that correspond to these pitches and colors. At the bottom of the chart, Unkovskaya has written "etc. to infinity."
which refers to Apollo and Greek cosmology. Remarking on Skryabin’s association of the lyre with the cosmos, Moreno suggests that the composer may have been trying to indicate that inaudible, abstract music governs the movements of bodies in the cosmos.\(^\text{139}\)

Not only was Skryabin inspired by the story of Prometheus, who defied the gods and brought fire to mankind, but Schloezier recalls that for Skryabin the demi-god Orpheus, represented the vestigial remembrance of a historic man who once wielded great power, the true nature and significance of which has been lost. But man’s incomprehension of the magical power of Orpheus’s art could not destroy this magic; its memory may be alive only in fairy tales, but its power is real and continues to influence the life of the world. An artist is therefore an unconscious magus . . .

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\(^{138}\) Anna Gawboy, “Alexander Scriabin’s Theurgy in Blue: Esotericism and the Analysis of Prometheus: Poem of Fire op. 60” (PhD diss., Yale, 2010), 185.

Scriabin was well on his way to Orphism. For him . . . Orphism was more than a poetic fairy tale, but a remembrance of an ancient power over nature and a fascinating subject for literary discussion.¹⁴⁰

The tale of Orpheus is well known to musicians. Orpheus, son of Apollo, god of light and music, travels to the underworld to bring back his wife, Euridice, who has died of a snake bite on their wedding day. Using the power of his music on the lyre, he persuades the rulers of Hades to allow Euridice to return to the land of the living. Ignoring the conditions of her release, he glances at her before they leave the underworld, and once again she is drawn into death. In his grief, he renounces all women and is torn apart by furious bacchantes. Some accounts say that Orpheus was also a prophet and that as a result of spreading secret knowledge previously known only to the gods (like Prometheus), he was killed instead either by angry countrymen or by a lightning bolt from Zeus.¹⁴¹ Why so many composers, including Skryabin, were drawn the Orpheus story is immediately apparent: Orpheus’ connection to music and his power to influence others through it, as well as his journey from life to death and back again. Many scholars have noted that variations of the myth demonstrate similarities between the Orpheus myth and the Christian story of Jesus’ resurrection.¹⁴²

The figure of the Prophet in the Prefatory Action libretto could be a veiled reference to Orpheus, an interpretation that is strengthened by several appearances of a lyre throughout the libretto. The image of the lyre, a Greek instrument associated with Orpheus, Apollo, truth, reason, and clarity, makes five appearances in the Prefatory Action libretto. The music emanating from this lyre is used throughout as a metaphor and impetus for spiritual transformation. It may be the most important symbol in the libretto, as the power of the lyre’s music is the final stimulus that pushes mankind to leave behind their physical bodies.

¹⁴⁰ Schloezer, Scriabin: Artist and Mystic, 234, 278.
¹⁴² Ibid., 281.
Mortals, I impart to you the mysteries of the celestial harmonies.
Let the hymns and glory on the solar lyre be spread! . . .

In this last moment of convergence
We will burst into eternity in our moments,
In this last sound on the lyre
We will all dissolve in the ethereal vortex.  

For the Greeks, Orpheus was much more than just a myth; he was also the prophet of a
religion and its own mystery cult that regularly performed rituals, called the Eleusinian Mysteries (See
Figure 2.15). Greek mystery religions were characterized by extreme secrecy, and details were

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143 Смертные, вам я поведу тайны небесных гармоний; Да раздаются гимны и славы на солнечной лире! . . . В
этот последний миг совлечены; Бросим мы вечности наших мгновений; В этом последнем звучи лирном; Все
мы растаем в вихре эфирном.
Skryabin, Russkiye Profilye, 218, 235. (My translation)
revealed only to initiates. Cults held annual, elaborate rituals, often re-enacting the mythological story associated with their patron god. While very little is known of the details of these practices, much of what initiates learned were creation stories. Rituals usually involved a sacrifice with the aim of spiritual purification and the promise of life after death.\textsuperscript{144}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{A visual interpretation of the Eleusinian Mystery rituals from Thomas Taylor’s \textit{Dissertation} (1790).}
\end{figure}

According to Schloezer, Skryabin was very much inspired by his study of ancient Greek \textit{Mystery} plays, which merged religious art and ritual, and modeled his own ideas for \textit{Mysterium} on this concept.\textsuperscript{145} He was so concerned with the integration of art and religion, Schloezer reports that he often said, “art is either religious, or nonexistent”\textsuperscript{146} Skryabin’s ideas for \textit{Mysterium}, which \textit{Prefatory Action} was supposed to represent, may very well have been intended as a type of modern-day

\textsuperscript{144} Morford, \textit{Classical Mythology}, 280-282.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 233, 189-190.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 234.
mystery ritual. In Russian, “Mysteries” (specifically in this context), translates to the literal Russian title of *Mysterium*;¹⁴⁷ Misterii (Мистерии). This same word can also mean "mystery" as in "mystery play." Schloezer, in fact, remembers that while Skryabin was working on *Prefatory Action*, he was not only fascinated by Greek dramas, which involved acting, song, and dance, with the goal of collective catharsis, but that, the composer was particularly interested in the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece.¹⁴⁸ Thomas Taylor’s Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries (1790)¹⁴⁹ and his translations of the Orphic hymns (1792)¹⁵⁰ were reprinted many times throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and often referenced by Blavatsky in her writings. The purposes of the rituals, which were to purify the soul and separate it from the physical world and body, have obvious relationships to Blavatsky’s Theosophical doctrine. Like Greek Mystery rituals, *Prefatory Action* revolved around a cosmic creation story and focused on sacrifices.

¹⁴⁷ In English scholarship, the title of this work is usually translated into the Latin term for “Mystery,” “Mysterium.”
CHAPTER 3

THE PREFATORY ACTION LIBRETTO

We, the fragrances of the earth, sing
We call you, bright traveler! . . .
We sing of the rapturous change
Of the joyous collapse of walls

- A. N. Skryabin

Analysis of the Libretto Poetry and Plot

The poetic text for Prefatory Action that Skryabin left behind at the time of his death might best be described as a libretto. As explained in Chapter 1, Prefatory Action was not modeled on contemporary opera; this production was to be more like an epic cantata or oratorio with a choir, orchestra, and perhaps dances, lights, and fragrances. The text is approximately 1,300 words long, originally handwritten in Russian in what Mikhail Gershenzon labels notebooks G (Г) and D (Д). Skryabin completed a first draft of the libretto and began work on a second, in which he was only able to complete a revision of half of the first draft, making considerable additions to and omissions from the first version. Both drafts were transcribed and published in 1919 by Gershenzon. The Prefatory Action text has a few phrases borrowed from an early abandoned project, an opera Skryabin worked on sporadically in 1905–8, though it would, perhaps be more accurate to say he began working on the Prefatory Action text in 1912–13, since he mentioned it in a letter to Tat’yana during that time (see Chapter 1).

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1 Мы, земли ароматы, поем; мы тебя, странник светлый, зовем... мы поем о восторгах измен; о крушений радостном стен.
3 A translation from the Russian to the French has also been published by the composer’s daughter, Alexander Scriabin, Notes et Réflexions: Carnets inédites, trans. and ed. Marina Scriabine (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979).
Poetic Style

Skryabin was an avid poetry reader and an amateur writer himself, often including his own verse as preface to his piano works. As discussed later in this chapter, around the time he began work on Prefatory Action he was very close to several Russian writers in the Symbolist school. His personal library contained several books of poetry by his friends and he was likely reasonably familiar with their contents, since he knew the authors themselves. He owned Ivanov’s Cor Ardens, the third volume of Konstantin Bal’mont’s complete works and Vertical (Vertikal), Valeri Briusov’s Nelli, among others, including issues of poetry journals.

Sabaneyev was a harsh critic of Skryabin’s writing skills, deriding his work as a sloppy imitation of the Symbolist aesthetic:

In reality, Skryabin was a great artist of sound, but in the field of poetry at this time, and as with previous attempts, he was far from great. He created an unoriginal work, inspired by symbolist motives (like those of V. Ivanov, Bal’mont), technically incompetent.5

Schloezer, on the other hand, thought the Prefatory Action poetry wonderful, and he was a literary critic.6 Skryabin’s poetry uses a rich vocabulary, complex word forms, vivid imagery, and synesthetic descriptions.7 The poetic style is considerably more elaborate than the text for Poem of Ecstasy (1905-8).8 For most of the libretto he maintains four-line stanzas, though there are many exceptions, since new sections are often delineated with new forms such as three-line stanzas or

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5 На самом же деле Скрябин, великий художник звука, в области поэзии оказался и на этот раз, как и в предыдущих опытах, далеко не на высоте. Он создал несамостоятельное произведение, навеянное мотивами символистов (В. Иванова, Бальмонта), ненужное технически.
Leonid Sabaneyev, Vospominaniya o Skryabine (Moscow: Knigozdatelstvo rabotnik prosvesheniya, 1922), 26. (My translation)
6 Schloezer, Scriabin: Artist and Mystic, 296.
7 It is a bit melodramatic for my taste, but not completely without merit.
8 Maria Chershintseva, “Evolutsiya religiozno-filosozhskikh iskaniy A.N. Skryabina: na pritere tekstov ‘poemy ekstaza’ i ‘predvaritel’no deistva’ i ikh prelomleniye v fortepiannom tvorchestve kompozitora ili igra v Bespredel’noye” in Uchenye Zapiski 6 (Moscow: Department kul’tury goroda Moskvy memoral’nyy muzei A.N. Skryabina, 2011), 56.
longer paragraphs with ten lines or more. Some sections of the libretto maintain a narrative position and lines of poetry become so long as to seem more like prose.

Skryabin clearly made a determined effort to maintain a consistent rhyme scheme, which is no small feat in Russian, especially for so long a text. The rhyme scheme is often broken or changed, though whether it is for lack of skill or just for variety is unclear. He may have hoped to correct rhyme and syllable count variations in later drafts of the work. Most of the four-line stanzas use a standard ABAB rhyme scheme, and longer stanzas, which tend to have only one or two words per line are usually AABBCC, etc. While poetic meter and syllable count are not always perfectly consistent, it is clear that he usually tries to have the first and third, and second and fourth line of every stanza display the same number of syllables to match the rhyme scheme. It is more striking when he has the same number of syllables per line, the result of which is very much like chanting, as in Figure 3.1, which is in trochaic meter (shown with scansion symbols), and five syllables per line.

To you, the dawn,  
Tēbyē, rāsvyētnī,  
Тебе, рассветный,  

To you, the breakthrough  
Tēbyē, prōřivnī,  
Тебе, прорывный,  

My answering moan  
Mōi stōn, ķtvētnī  
Мой стон ответный  

My invoking cry!  
Mōi krīk, prīzi.vnī  
Мой крик призывный!  

Figure 3.1. English translation, phonetic translation with scansion symbols showing poetic meter, and original stanza from Prefatory Action libretto. This shows the most common poetic structure in this work: four-line stanzas, ABAB rhyme scheme. The meter is trochaic and each line has the same number of syllables (5), imitating a ritualistic chant.

While simple rhyme schemes such as these may have seemed a little outdated even by Pushkin’s time in the early 19th century, they were still fairly common in Skryabin’s era, especially among the Silver Age poets with whom he was personally connected. In Figure 3.2 the poem “Crucified” (Soraspastyiye) from Bryusov’s Nelli (a book Skryabin owned), is one of many with the

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9 Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 203. (My translation)  
same 4-line stanzas and ABAB rhyme scheme as Prefatory Action, so it was certainly a common
poetical device and form, and not necessarily a sign that Skryabin’s poetry was at all crude.

You are crucified with me
On the high cross
Do you see the light pink
In the heavens, on high?

Ti, so mnoi korapyatii
Na visokom krestye!
Vidish svet rosovatii
V nebesakh, v visote?

This day burns
The long day of our
suffering.
As if somebody is sobbing
The clinking of war armor.

Eto dyen dorogayet
Dolgiy dyen nashikh muk.
Slovno kto-to ridayet -
Broni voinov stuk.

Ты со мной соранятый
На высоком кресте!
Видишь свет розовый
В небесах, в высоте?

Этот день дгорает
Долгий день наших мук.
Словно кто-то рыдает -
Брони воинов стук.11

Figure 3.2. Contemporary poetry from Skryabin’s library, Briusov’s “Crucified” (Soraspyatiye) from Nelli. ABAB rhyme scheme.

The Plot

Just describing the plot of Skryabin’s libretto is an interpretive act, since the whole text is
cloaked in the weighty, allegorical language of Symbolist poetic practices. The most general synopsis
that is widely agreed upon is that it tells the history of mankind from a Skryabinist, or Theosophical,
perspective, ending with the joyous dissolution of human bodies.

The incomplete, sketchy status of the work considerably complicates interpretation,
especially lacunae in stage directions and character labels. The first draft contains a broad mix of
first-person conversation and third-person narrative without any indication of who should be
speaking or to whom. The second draft clarifies characters’ dialogue, though it only covers the first
half of the story and even then, is still ambiguous on many points. The speakers (in the case of the
choir) and characters Skryabin explicitly designates, in order of appearance, are:

11 Valeri Briusov, Stikhi Nelli (Moskva: Knigoizdatel’ctvo Ckoroshon, 1911), 31. (My translation)
1. Choir
2. Voice of the Feminine
3. Voice of the Masculine
4. (Creativity)
5. Waves/The Wave
6. Awakening Feelings
7. Ray (as in a beam of light)
8. Mountains
9. Fields
10. Forest
11. Deserts

The following is my understanding of the plot of the Prefatory Action text, drawing freely on both the first and second drafts:

At first, there was nothing, and then love was born. This self-generating love acted as a catalyst for the creation of the universe. In the second draft “Our Father” (нап Отец) also exists at this time. He is God, who remains separate from and above the developments of mankind.

And the moment of love gives birth to eternity
And the depths of space . . .

Greatness is being accomplished!
And sweet once more
Is the birth of love!

A love that loves itself
loving love
Recreates itself

Within this love the Feminine invokes the Masculine. These are allegorical characters who represent the concepts of these genders in a spiritual, rather than physiologically gendered beings.

The Voice of the Feminine describes herself as death and the two mingle with one another, opening up the next stage of development in humanity.

Voice of the Feminine
I am the shining joy of final happenings
I am a diamond burning in the white flame.
I am the unspeakable bliss of dissolution.
I am the joy of death, I am freedom, I am ecstasy! . . .

Голос Женственного
Я радость светлая последнего свершенья
Я в белом пламени сгорающий алмаз
Я несказанное блаженство растворенья
Я радость смерти, я свобода, я экстаз! . . .

12 Skryabin, Russkie Pripilei, 202. (My translation)
**Voice of the Masculine**
Harken to the plea and open the secrets of death to me . . .

**Voice of the Feminine**
Heed the dawn, the abysses of life between us With their cheating, agonizing dreams . . . In order to capture me, you must pass through them Defeat them and succumb at the end of the path.

**Voice of the Feminine and Masculine**
Oh, divine heroism, celestial dance, In you, we gain victory over the abyss . . . In you we bless one another in death.

The Father challenges the masculine and feminine to present sacrifices (seven in the first draft and three in the second) in exchange for victory over the abyss. Their combination requires that they differentiate between each other, and between sensations, which is a creative act. Seven angels, “fire bringers” and “world-builders,” are summoned to assist humanity in their creative action.

Behold: seven angels in ethereal vestments Glorious heralds of your immortal words . . . Coming to serve you in sacred unions!

The Angels Fire-bringers Fate directors

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13 Skryabin, *Russkiye Propilei*, 236-237. (My translation)
The creative act that was the combination of masculine and feminine impulses awakens “Waves” of sensations who call themselves “the waves of life.” Using sensation, these waves create a world of dreams, which are false but pleasant.

We are the shining children of divine dreams . . .
We are the radiant crowd of flame-thoughts . . .
We are born by your desire for difference,
The celestial fire awakens us
We are waves of feelings, world of deceits and lies,
We captivate everyone with luminous ringing.
We are the waves of life

These waves awaken feelings in the universe, mostly sexual ones. The “foam” of the waves of sensation falls deeper into the abyss of life (mentioned earlier as lying between Masculine and Feminine impulses). The waves of feelings and sensation become clothed in flesh and are drawn into the “sweet captivity” of the world of appearances.

**Awakening Feelings**
**Пробуждающаяся Чувства**

Tender joy
Нежная радость

Of first touch
Первых касаний

Mysterious sweetness
Тайная садость

Of damp kisses . . .
Влажных лобзаний . . .

**Waves**
Волны

In the languishing valleys
В долы томления

14 Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 238. (My translation)
15 Ibid., 239-40. (My translation)
16 Sometimes referred to as a valley (доль).
Waves streaming,
in willful clouds
We are clothed . . .
All loving, all pleasureful
All languorous, all delightful,
All agonizing, charming
Tender, fleshly

Oh our captivity
Sweet captivity . . .
We comprehend all borders
We have become clothed in flesh.

A ray of light that represents divine thought shines down from heaven. This is the connecting thread of knowledge between humankind and the Father. The feminine Wave and masculine Ray mingle in sexualized terms, and consciousness is born as a result of their union. They understand mortality and are given the power of differentiation. With this comes the conscious existence of the I, and the unconscious existence, the not-I.

Wave
Awaken in my consciousness
Awaken, oh golden ray!
Be an obedient spell
And combine with me - the wave! . . .

Plunge into me languorously
Plunge in, I am the wave . . .

O, sacred moment of creation
Blissful moment of fire
You showed me the image
Of white death, mortality . . .

You wakened consciousness in me
of the dual-united existence
I am now henceforth
I and the foreign not-I
All-knowing differentiation is given.

Волны излившиеся,
В тучи хотенья
Мы облеклись . . .
Все любовный, все усладный,
Все истомный, Все отрадный,
Все мучительный, прелестный,
Нежный, телесный

О наш плен
Сладкий плен . . .
Нас со всех сторон объявший.
Нам одеждой телом ставший17

A ray of light that represents divine thought shines down from heaven. This is the connecting thread of knowledge between humankind and the Father. The feminine Wave and masculine Ray mingle in sexualized terms, and consciousness is born as a result of their union. They understand mortality and are given the power of differentiation. With this comes the conscious existence of the I, and the unconscious existence, the not-I.

Волна
Пробудись во мне сознанием
Пробудись, о луч златой
Будь послушен заклинанием
И смесь со мной - волной!18 . . .

Погрузись в меня, истомную
Погрузись-же, я волна.19 . . .

О, священный миг творения
Миг блаженный огневой
Ты явил мне отражение
Смерти белой, роковой . . .

Разбудила во мне сознание
Двуединого бытия
Я отныне сочетание
Я и чуждого не-я . . .
Вся созерцанием различный отдана20

17 Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 241-42. (My translation)
18 Ibid., 243. (My translation)
19 Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 212. (My translation)
20 Ibid., 245-46. (My translation)
Given the power (or curse) of differentiation, humans cease to be one entity as individuals distinguish themselves from one another. Natural formations appear as consciousnesses by recognizing (опознать) themselves; mountains, field, forest, and desert announce and describe themselves.\textsuperscript{21} A “traveler,” or “messenger” from heaven is invoked to aid mankind’s ability to love and create the material world. He plays the celestial lyre, and humans sing with the messenger harmoniously, creating societies amongst themselves. Thus far, the history of humans through the feminine and masculine combination and the coupling of the wave and ray has only involved touching (descriptions of caresses and texture), visual descriptions of colors, and perhaps taste (the word “sweet” [сладкий] is used often, though vaguely). With the experience of music on the lyre they hear and sing, and they are also assaulted with the smells of the earth. Having experienced all senses, they have become completely captivated by corporeality and are drawn into individual bodies, sucked further towards the bottom of the “abyss of life.”

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\textsuperscript{21} Marina Scriabine suggests that these might be metaphors for human experience, rather than the world actually being created. However, since Skryabin often speaks in his journals of the material world as being created by collective experience and humanity is, at this point, descending towards the material, I’ve interpreted instead, as the earth and its natural formations literally taking shape.

[Messenger] 22  
Mortals, I impart to you the mysteries of the celestial harmonies.  
Let the hymns and glory be spread on the solar lyre! . . .

[Mankind]  
What trembling lights  
Which charm and dazzle?  
What sounds run and pour forth  
Maddeningly poisoning us . . .

Everything is revealed  
Luscious flowers  
Everything is scented  
Of sweet dreams . . .

We surrender to you  
As sacred destiny  
We hasten to the valley  
In fragrant shadows.

The next section is explicitly labeled “Songs and Dances of the Fallen” (Песня-пляска Падших). We finally arrive at the stage of human history with which we are most familiar, life on earth as divided societies, countries, war, and sin. Humans have forgotten that they were once one being, and they are afraid of death, fostering violence and war among themselves.

We breathe the stench of black blood  
To strive for vile pleasures  
We charge into a fiery dance . . .

To build filthy hovels  
In which to raise our thrones  
In which to surrender to our passion . .

The songs of heaven are tiresome to us  
Our songs are dissonant  
We are blind to the revelations of heaven

22 Indications for which character is speaking were only included in the second draft of the libretto, which is incomplete. By this point in the text, we have only the first draft to rely on and I can only make educated guesses concerning the speakers.

23 Skryabin, Russkie Propile, 216-20. (My translation)
We delight only in corpses
Only in splatters of black blood
In our loathsome love . . .

We lost the link to heaven
We dispersed ourselves
We oppose one another
We conduct terrible wars.

The most terrible individual of all is the fearsome “God of Blood,” the most savage and murderous man on earth. He has sunk the lowest into the abyss because he is the vilest, and thus he is the farthest along the predestined path of human development. Finally exhausted by killing, he flees society into the desert where he contemplates his actions, sympathizes with his victims, and understands that universal suffering is caused by humans in opposition to one another.

Contemplating Death, he first finds the idea hideous, but he finally responds to her call and loses his fear, finding her face beautiful. He turns his eyes towards the worlds beyond the abyss, and he communes with death, embracing love. He understands that the material world of individuality is a false construction, and he hears the universe instead as a harmonious symphony of voices. Death reveals the mysteries of heaven to him and charges him to share his newfound light, to spread his teaching to others and help them in their suffering. He tries to convince humankind to accept Death and his teaching is equated with playing the lyre. They fear his ideas, however, and kill him. Though his teachings were initially rejected, his ideas grow in mankind’s consciousness long after his movement to higher worlds.

[Prophet]
I am the greatest conqueror, the most enraptured.
The most reckless, the most powerful,
I bring death more than the venous serpent . . .
I am the god of greed and destruction,

Я всех победный, всех упоённый
Всех дерзновенный и всех сильный . . .
Я смертоносней, чем яды змей . . .
Я бог алканья и разрушенья

24 Skryabin, Russkie Propilei, 220-22. (My translation)
I am the scourge of the people, I am the God of blood . . .

[Narration]
He runs to the desert where, in the blue silence
In the refuge of peace and total silence,
The soul will come to know the terror of contemplation
of the depth of his unforgiveable guilt . . .
He surrendered to a mysterious command,
The missing link has been lost . . . Sundered by dreams
And taken by someone’s elemental vortexes of achievements
He strives towards the light, towards a tender voice

[Death]
Do not be scared, my child, I am your desire!
Blinded by me, you do not recognize me!
More than once I came for you unexpectedly
You were frightened of Death, you fled from it . . .

My caresses seemed like daggers to you
And eyes of fear deformed my face . . .

Your renunciation of the purple world
In you awakened the bride—which is me
Understand all the joys of azure heaven
I will reveal to you the mysteries of fire! . . .

You must go to your dying brothers,
Give your soul in service,
Prepare them to receive the suffering . . .
to fall as a sacrifice, and through that, to find grace

Teach them . . .
to find grace
And raise a temple to me . . .

[Narration]
He soars towards man, renewed by suffering,
To teach them what to expect on the path . . .
To save them from slavery to passions . . .

[Mankind]
We do not understand your tiresome speeches,
In vain, oh traveler, you have come to disturb us . . .

[Narration]
But he, insisting, drew anger and vengeance
They persecute him, lead him to torture
and he, blissfully happy, with a forgiving smile . . .

He was killed, and from heights, disembodied,
He observed the seeds of learning grow

Having sunk to the bottom of the abyss, having lost their connection to heaven, humans have reached a point as far from their origins as possible; they are maximally saturated in the lowest world of appearances, and are finally able to accept the Prophet’s teachings concerning death and love. At this point the story is no longer a history, but has become a prediction of the near future, and self-referential. We arrive at the present moment in terms of the story, which is actually the near future according to the audience; the temple that Death instructed the people to build (through the Prophet) has been completed. We are supposed to be witnessing the ritual described by the choir, and the “guardians” enacting the ritual in the temple are the performers/participants themselves. References to the temple and the current moment of performance, breaking the fourth wall, have appeared throughout the entire libretto, so we might assume that reciting mankind’s history has been part of this ritual the audience is now witnessing, which is supposed to be taking place in the near future.

Humankind, as represented by those performing the ritual in the temple, embraces love and death, leaving behind the “prisons” of their corporeal bodies in order to let fall all the borders that

25 Skryabin, Russkie Propilei, 222-30. (My translation)
hold individuals apart. As they dissolve, they are able to become one entity yet again, to continue
their journey upwards - and backwards through the stages described until this point - until they
come again to the point where only love and the Father exist in the universe.

And you, guardians of the colorful stones
Construct a new temple from them.

So that in blissful intoxication
Of its immortal beauty
In the last, sweetest achievement
You can master your dream

Bring the precious stones
They are heavily perfumed,
The sacred moment has arrived
To unify the dispersed dreams . . .

Here his is, here, in the quickening of beating hearts
Our father descends to us in our lively dance
Here she is, in the sweetly dissolving firmament
Death approaches us in our lively dance

The hour of judgement has arrived
You have awakened in us . . .

In this last moment of convergence
We will burst into eternity in our moments,
In this last sound on the lyre
We will all dissolve in the ethereal vortex

We will be born in the wind!
We will awaken in heaven!
We will merge our feelings in a single wave!
And in the luxurious blaze
Of the last blossoming
We will appearing to one another
In the naked beauty
Of blazing souls
We will dissipate . . .
We will dissolve . . .

26 Skryabin, Russkie Propilei, 231-35. (My translation)
Interpretation of the Libretto’s Symbols, Cosmology, and Influences

Structure of the Plot and Allegorical Symbols

There are many references throughout the libretto that suggest that these events have happened before and will happen again as a result of predestination. This constant, circular motion of humankind’s history in the libretto is sometimes referred to as “the law of eternal revolt.” The alienation from heaven and depths of violence described in the “Songs and Dances of the Fallen” are just as necessary to this cycle as the heights of pure love; the text often speaks of how one must travel all the way to “the depths” in order to rise again.27

Once again the will is Eternal in you
To recognize the joy of creation
Once again the will is never ending . . .
The same path that, in descending
Led you here to these prisons
Will lead you to freedom
When the valley is conquered
And this ancient movement,
Which gave birth to this world
Destroys the borders, and finally
Dissolves sweetly in the ether.

27 Andrei Bandura has a slightly different interpretation from my circular one. He maintains that the references to these events happening “once again” mean that they had happened before in a parallel universe.


28 Skryabin, Russkiye Propilei, 202. (My translation)

29 Ibid., 231. (My translation)
circular view of human history relates to Skryabin’s concepts of involution and evolution. When hu
mankind reaches the point of maximum chaos they are ready to stop involving and begin evolving.\(^30\)

![Diagram](image.png)

**Figure 3.3.** The human evolutional process, as described in the *Prefatory Action* libretto, represented circularly.

Though the libretto refers to a larger, cyclical process, it only follows the story of humans’
descent into the material world (present time) and the beginning of their ascent; it does not repeat
itself and return all the way to heaven. There are three major dramatic points in the story, each
describing a symbolic union of feminine and masculine characters (see Figure 3.4). The first union is
between the masculine and feminine voices, the second is between the female wave (volna) and the

male ray (luch), and the third is between the Death and the Prophet. We might assume that the rest of the path not covered by the libretto would be the first half in reverse - the parting of the wave from the ray, for example, would be next.

Figure 3.4. A diagram showing the three combination of feminine and masculine characters and the scope of the Prefatory Action story in terms of its own cyclical cosmology (compare to Figure 3.3).

The face of Death and the lyre are the two most important symbols throughout the story, and along with the messengers who are regularly invoked for assistance, seem to act as catalysts to spur mankind on to new stages of existence. Death identifies herself as the voice of the feminine towards the beginning of the story, and she appears throughout as a guiding force and vessel of knowledge, but she is curiously absent in the final moments in her temple when the participants dissolve. The lyre does not appear until after the wave and ray combine, but it is extremely
significant after that point, representing humanity’s underlying unity despite their temporarily divided form.

The most powerful figure of all, the Father, does not appear often in the text. He alone seems to be set apart from the cyclical progression of the story, ever-present, unchanging, and in a kind of supervisory role. Maria Chershintsyeva suggests that, because of the mention of the universe “breathing” towards the beginning of the poem, this father is the Hindu god Vishnu, whose breath powers cycles of time in the universe, and who is heavily featured in Theosophical cosmology.\(^{31}\) Marina Skryabin suggests that “The Father” is unable to have experiences of his own, so he creates his children so that he can know death through them. She also points out an important discrepancy between Skryabin’s assertions of Godhood in his journals and the appearance of a God who is separate from humanity in the form of the Father in the libretto. When humanity reaches the top of the cycle described in Figure 3.3, do they become god or exist simultaneously?\(^{32}\) The Father’s place in Skryabin’s cosmological scheme might be gleaned from some drawings in the composer’s notebooks, presumed to have been started around 1909. These are several variations of concentric, interlocking circles or shapes (usually seven) contained within a larger circle, perhaps a reference to his human history, which is contained within a larger presence, the Father (see Figure 3.5).\(^{33}\)

Throughout the text, Skryabin creates a dense web of interlocking symbols with adjectives and associated allegorical meanings.

**Death:** White, heaven, feminine, face, beauty, sweetness, silence, light, freedom, ecstasy, diamond, eternity, dissolution, temple, mystery

**Heaven:** love, nothingness, unity, celestial, sacred, starry

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32 Marina Scriabine, "Überlegungen zum *Acte préalable*," 15-16.
33 Schloezer has a different interpretation of the father from mine. He claims that, “the father dies in the throes of creation,” though I don’t find that as a very clear event in the libretto.
Abyss: dark, black, sin, challenge, valley, bottom of the goblet, chasm, life

Figure 3.5. My reproduction of a drawing by Skryabin, kept with a 1909 notebook in the Scriabin Museum.

Fire: knowledge, lightning, creation

Angels: warrior, messenger, traveler, builder, wall destroyer, fire

Waves: sensation, swarms, dreams, foam, deceit, flowing, caresses, feminine, clothes, desire, prison, damp, soft, slumber

Ray: masculine, knowledge, spirit, lightning, link

Lyre: sun, consonance, messenger, truth, vibration, hymn, knowledge

Creation: Fire, differentiation, flight, consciousness

Purple: material world

White/Blue: Heaven, sapphire
The Libretto and Skryabin's Journals

In 1905, Skryabin wrote in his journals:

The highest synthesis is the divine synthesis, which in the last moment of being will include the universe and give the experience of harmonious awakening (ecstasy) and thus return it to a state of repose, nothingness. This synthesis can be accomplished only by human consciousness, by the highest individuality, that appears like the central global consciousness, releases souls from shackles of the past and lures all living things into its divine creative flight. I speak of the final ecstasy, which is already near.\textsuperscript{34}

The story of the libretto is, to a great extent, the dramatization of Skryabin’s philosophies, which he had been developing for nearly a decade. These are most clearly expressed in his private journals from around 1905. As explained in Chapter 2, Skryabin spent considerable energy educating himself in philosophy, psychology and occult religions. His journals represent his personal, internal investigations into his own experience as a means to dissect conscious experience and the nature of reality as he knew it. He concluded, like many other 19\textsuperscript{th} century philosophers, that the world he perceived was interpreted only through the medium of his senses, and that it was not truly reality (i.e., the “thing-in-itself”). Whereas most other philosophers concluded that it was impossible to conceive of the universe beyond sensory input through one’s body, Skryabin speculated on how that kind of existence could be possible, what it would be like, and how it might be achieved. He found that his mind actively recognized sensations and constructed “reality” from there, so the universe was therefore a creative act within his mind.

\textsuperscript{34} Высший же синтез есть тот божественный синтез, который в последний момент бытия включит в себя вселенную и даст ей пережить гармонический расцвет (экстаз) и таким образом вернет ее к состоянию покоя, небытия. Такой синтез может быть совершен только человеческим сознанием, высшей индивидуальностью, которая является центральным мировым сознанием, освободит дух от оков прошлого и увлекет в свой божественный творческий полет все живущее. Я говорю о последнем экстаз, который уже близко. Skryabin, \textit{Russkiye Prilozhi}, 171. (My translation)
The material from which the world is constructed is creative thought, creative imagination. Resorting to an analogy in nature, and ocean constructed of many drops, in which each is exactly the same creative imagination as the ocean itself.\textsuperscript{35}

Skryabin finds that individuals are incapable of consciously manipulating the world around them because they are limited by coexisting wills who also create the universe based on hereditary examples of their forebears, “dreaming the world together.” In order to experience the universe as it really is, rather than through the lens of one’s body, mankind needs to stop creating and differentiating, which would merge all consciousnesses.

Though written almost a decade before \textit{Prefatory Action}, the philosophies in his journals have a clear connection to the libretto. The libretto’s description of the body as a prison, and the ending where bodies dissolves and humanity “mingles their emotions in a single wave” is a reference to this early idea of indifferentiation and experiencing the thing-in-itself without the medium of bodies. The journals explore sets of dualities, shown in Figure 2.5, which are similar to the \textit{Prefatory Action} Heaven/Material World polarization, in which heaven is equated with death and unity, and earth is the strife and conflict of individualities.

Where the journals and the libretto part ways is in the historical position of \textit{Prefatory Action}. The account of humankind’s history is, in some ways, very much opposed to the character and purpose of the journals, which are focused on empirical studies of the composer’s own experiences and conscious processes. The scheme of human evolution described in \textit{Prefatory Action} takes place outside Skryabin’s self-observations, and so draws upon other research and influences, namely that of the Theosophical Society, which he became increasingly interested in during the decade leading up to his work on \textit{Prefatory Action}.

\textsuperscript{35} Материя, из которого построен мир, есть творческая мысль, творческое воображение. Это прибегая к аналогий в природе - океан, который состоит из множества капелек, из которых каждая есть совершенно такое же творческое воображение, как и самый океан.

Religious Influences on the Libretto

While *Prefatory Action* has a great many similarities to Theosophical cosmology as described in Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, it does not imitate Theosophical Doctrine exactly, and it therefore should not be considered a Theosophical work. In fact, upon first encountering *The Secret Doctrine* in 1905, Skryabin wrote in a letter to Tat’yana that he was attracted to it because it corresponded to ideas he already had, and according to both Sabaneyev’s and Schloezer’s memoirs on the composer, he always used Theosophical research to his own ends.36

Skryabin combines his own specific philosophies on creativity, differentiation, ecstasy, and unity with the Theosophical concept of planes of existence and the history of man. As explained in Chapter 2, Theosophy preaches cycles of spiritual unity with God and material existence, corresponding to periods of creation and repose, drawing on “ancient texts” as historical research (e.g., “The Book of Dzyan”).37 During Skryabin’s lifetime, the Theosophical Society based their activities on the idea that humankind had reached the point of maximum attachment to the material and was ready to begin their ascent towards the “oversoul”; it was their mission to educate and prepare humanity for this eventual enlightenment.38 Towards the beginning of the libretto (in the first draft) mankind has seven trials to overcome, and this could very well be a reference to the seven planes of existence in Blavatsky’s universe, the lowest of which is the material world and the highest of which is purely spiritual (see Figure 3.7).

One difference between the Theosophical cosmology and Skryabin’s lies in their respective attitudes towards ritual. To be sure, temples and rituals are referenced constantly throughout *The Secret Doctrine*, but in that case they are viewed from a historical standpoint. Ancient practices are

38 Ibid., 119.
fodder for the modern man to consider, not to undertake themselves, and the vast majority of Theosophists did not believe that humans would abandon their bodies for thousands of years yet, and even then it would be a gradual process. They focused on spiritual wellness through meditation and education. Throughout Skryabin’s libretto, however, changes in the human state do not occur gradually, but in stages. Events trigger massive changes in the libretto - i.e., the combination of the wave and the ray to create consciousness. The modern age ritual of mass suicide (so to speak) at the end of Prefatory Action is not a part of Theosophical belief.

Figure 3.6. Diagram of the seven planes of existence, reproduced from Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*.39

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There are many figures and symbols that appear in Skryabin’s libretto that appear to derive directly from Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*.

**Messengers**: Blavatsky writes in the secret doctrine,

> The whole Kosmos is guided, controlled, and animated by almost endless series of Hierarchies of sentient Beings, each having a mission to perform, and who — whether we give to them one name or another, and call them Dhyan-Chohans or Angels — are “messengers” in the sense only that they are the agents of Karmic and Cosmic Laws.\(^{40}\) . . . It is the “movers,” the “runners,” . . . who do the work of formation, the “messengers” of the manvantaric law.\(^{41}\)

In Theosophical cosmology monadic souls are these messengers, evolved beings from beyond the material world who appear in order to assist humanity with their teachings. Skryabin’s “angels” in the *Prefatory Action* libretto seem to have the same role as those monadic souls in theosophy. Both are described as “angels,” “messengers,” and “fire-bringers.” In the libretto these are the beings who appear between stages of evolution to assist human evolution. “The Prophet” himself, after his seclusion and contemplation, seems to have become one such monadic soul; having received hidden (occult) knowledge from death, he shares that information with humanity in the role of the messenger, even allegorically playing the lyre, as had the messenger before him.

In 1924 Russian painter Nicholai Roerich, donated his work, “Messenger” to the Theosophical Society in Adyar, India, dedicating the work to Blavatsky (see Figure 3.8).\(^{42}\) In Roerich’s painting, the Messenger is invited into a Buddhist temple, and appears with lightning in the background, symbolic of divine knowledge. Lightning has the same association in Skryabin’s libretto, as do messengers.

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\(^{40}\) Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* vol. 1, 274.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 346.

Color Associations: There are a few specific colors mentioned Skryabin’s libretto that are consistently associated with concepts and places on the “astral plane.” These color associations are very similar to those in Theosophical discourse. In Theosophy, white is transcendence and purity (Skryabin’s Death and Heaven), blue is for spirituality (The Prophet’s “azure” spiritual contemplation), red is for sensuality and lust, and black is for malice and evil (Skryabin’s “Songs and Dances of the Fallen”). Skryabin and Theosophy part ways on the color purple, which for Skryabin is associated with the material world (the Prophet’s “renunciation of the purple world” after his change), but which for Theosophy is “religious fervor.”

Figure 3.7. Nicholai Roerich, *Messenger*, 1924.

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43 Ibid., 123.
**Death:** In Skryabin’s libretto, Death is personified, a kind and knowing deity with which the Prophet converses. The story of The Prophet’s communion with Death is remarkably similar to the *Katha Upanishad*, a text fundamental to Vedan philosophy that was admired by nineteenth-century philosophers such as Schopenhauer. Skryabin owned a copy of this text, and its ideas are common in Theosophy as well44 (sd: 39). In the Upanishad story, a man named Nakiketa speaks with death and learns a fire ritual. Death offers him riches, but he refuses, asking instead for knowledge of what lies beyond death so that he can escape the cycle of rebirth. It is revealed to Nakiketa that:

> Beyond the senses there are the objects, beyond the objects there is the mind, beyond the mind there is the intellect, the Great Self is beyond the intellect. Beyond the Great there is the Undeveloped, beyond the Undeveloped there is the Person (purusha). Beyond the Person there is nothing - this is the goal, the highest end.45

This goal of movement through stages to reach nothingness and escape the material world is similar to the concept of *Prefatory Action*.

**Dream:** Theosophy describes terrestrial life as a dream, sometimes called Maya. Much like Skryabin’s description of the dreams created by “The Waves,” in Theosophy, what we perceive as reality through corporal senses is illusory, meant to be discarded with more spiritual development,

> The one reality, still, in its manifested phenomenal and temporary appearance, is no better than the evanescent illusion of our senses . . .46 Maya, or illusion is an element which enters into all finite things, for everything that exists has only a relative, not an absolute, reality, since the appearance which the hidden noumenon assumes for any observer depends upon his power of cognition . . .47 As we rise in the scale of development, we perceive that during the stages through which we have passed we mistook shadows for realities, and the upward progress of the Ego is a series of progressive awakenings, each advance bringing with it the idea that now, at last, we have reached reality, but only when we shall have reached the absolute consciousness, and blended our own with it, shall we be free from the delusions produced by Maya.48

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47 Ibid., 39.
48 Ibid., 40.
Fire: In Skryabin’s libretto, fire is mentioned constantly, most often in the context of secret knowledge, mystery, or creation. Death describes herself as “the white flame,” and the messengers are called “fire-bringers.” Skryabin was drawn to fire as an artistic symbol long before Prefatory Action with the Prometheus symphony, for example, (Prometheus being a mythological figure who took fire from the gods to bring it to man) as well as the famous piano character piece, Vers la flamme (Towards the Flame). In The Secret Doctrine, fire is imbued with a symbolic importance of exactly the same nature. Blavatsky writes,

What says the esoteric teaching with regards to fire? Fire, it says, is the most perfect and unadulterated reflection, in Heaven as on Earth, of the One Flame. It is Life and Death, the origin and the end of every material thing. It is divine Substance.

Skryabin’s gendering of fire is different from Blavatsky’s, which Skryabin initially associates with feminine Death, but which is gendered masculine in the Secret Doctrine, though Blavatsky sometimes contradicts herself on this matter (and others).

Skryabin, Ivanov, and the Silver Age Symbolist Poets

Skryabin’s own influences as a writer are invaluable in an analysis of his poetical text for Prefatory Action. Around 1909 Skryabin began to make lasting friendships with the writers in the first generation of the Russian Silver Age, the Symbolist poets. The writer with the greatest influence among this group, which included Aleksandr Blok and Konstantin Bal’mont, was Vyacheslav Ivanov. Skryabin had more in common with these authors than he did with other composers of his generation, as the poets were also fascinated with occult and mystical ideas, and were attracted to the symbolist bent of Theosophy, which treated the world as an immense cryptogram and was easily

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49 Ibid., 121.
50 Ibid., 57.
51 Lobanova, Teosof, Teurg, Mistik, Mag., 8.
adaptable to poetry. Presumably, Skryabin attended their meetings at “The Tower,” the nickname for Ivanov’s house, at which regular salons were held. Sabaneyev claims that Skryabin read the full libretto to his poet friends (he specifically mentions Jurgis Baltrusaitis and Ivanov), and apparently the composer received some constructive criticism from them. Unfortunately, in Ivanov’s book on the composer he gives very little detail on his, or Skryabin’s impressions of the libretto, aside from calling it a “polar rhythmic dithyramb,” which hints at Ancient Greek influence; he also mentions that the composer cared very deeply for the integration of the text with the orchestral part.

Skryabin and Ivanov seem to have become close around 1913, and had much in common upon first meeting. They were both obsessed with ancient Greek history. Skryabin had already completed his *Prometheus* symphony before they met and Ivanov was a professor of Classical philology. Classical Greek references to Dionysian rites permeate much of Ivanov’s work. Most importantly, both believed strongly in the importance of ritual in modern life. Ivanov’s entire oeuvre can be read as a fusion of his personal life and religion - he self-mythologized his experiences, making his life events seem symbolic and predestined. Later, during the Soviet period, he worked to promote ritual as a necessary part of social engagement.

As a Symbolist poet and writer, Ivanov believed that symbols were indicative of a higher, purely mental reality that were revealed to the artist through spiritual intuition. Ivanov wrote prolifically on the concept of unifying art forms; beginning with Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a point

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52 Forrester, *Russian Silver Age Poetry*, 80.
54 Ivanov, *Skryabin*, 35.
56 Ibid., 34.
57 The biographical connections between Ivanov’s life and works, which show Ivanov’s equation of life events with Greek fate, drama, and ritual, is the premise of Robert Bird’s *The Russian Prospero: The Creative Universe of Viacheslav Ivanov* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).
of departure, he extended the idea of an ideal, complete artwork that should make no distinction between performer and audience. Regular discussions between Skryabin and Ivanov in the 1910s must have been mutually influential. Skryabin’s goals for Prefatory Action echo Ivanov’s Theosophically influenced artistic theories from his essay “On the Limits of Art,” first presented at the Moscow Religious-Philosophical society in December of 1913. Skryabin often attended these meetings. “On the Limits of Art” explains that the artist makes unseen emotions and thoughts that he/she senses through intuition, more tangible. “Material is animated in a work of art . . . The artist triumphs if he persuades us that the marble craved his chisel.” Ivanov’s Po Zvezdam (By the Stars) (1907) describes collective and ritualistic artistic expression as an uplifting experience, which Malcolm Brown notes in “Russian Mystic Symbolism” is eerily similar to contemporary descriptions of the composer’s goals for Prefatory Action and Mysterium.

Architecture craves assemblages of the people, music craves chorus and drama, drama craves music; the theater aspires to unite in a single “act,” the whole crowd gathered for the celebration of a collective joy . . Is this the way the dithyrambic chorus of the future Mystery must be? No. As in ancient times, at the time of “the birth of Tragedy from the spirit of Music,” the crowd must dance and sing, move rhythmically and praise the god with words.

How much Ivanov agreed with Skryabin’s belief system in Prefatory Action and Mysterium is the subject of some debate. Nikolai Pavlovich Ulyanov, a painter closely associated with the Symbolist writer’s circle, claimed in unpublished memoirs that Ivanov thought Skryabin’s work for Mysterium was “insane.” In other sources Ivanov wholly supported Skryabin’s ideas; after Skryabin’s death the poet regularly came to Skryabin’s defense. When Leonid Sabaneyev (Skryabin’s earliest...

60 Bird, Selected Essays: Viacheslav Ivanov, 259.
biographer - see Chapter 1) openly criticized Skryabin after his death for his “deranged” inability to separate art and religion, Ivanov published an open letter, supporting Skryabin's ideas concerning Mysterium.

He did not imagine that he would unite people *through himself* but most definitely despite himself, outside of himself, by an automatic and miraculous movement of the collective spirit in those who had gathered, for whom he prepared in his *Mysterium* only a kind of material for a sacramental rite.

And his very writing of the *Mysterium* was for him an inward impossibility until the hour when his “I” had melted and had been destroyed and his theurgic hand had become but the obedient tool of the Divine Will that had accepted the sacrifice of his person.64

Some contend that Ivanov helped Skryabin write the text for *Prefatory Action*.65 While there is not necessarily evidence for it, it certainly makes a compelling argument. Ivanov’s poetry is very similar to the *Prefatory Action* libretto in both style and content, especially those poems Ivanov considered “dithyrambic.”66 Skryabin owned a copy of Ivanov’s *Cor Ardens*, a collection of poetry spanning a period from 1905-1912. Whether or not Ivanov actually helped with *Prefatory Action, Cor Ardens* likely had a great impact on Skryabin’s writing. Fusing art and religion in Ivanov’s work, for example, is a selection from the tenth poem published in the book, “The Fire-Bringers” (*Ogennotsi*), which he explicitly labeled a dithyramb. This work and has many features in common with *Prefatory Action*, including ritualistic instructions, color associations, metaphorical “marriage,” and symbolic descriptions of fire, incantation, and wings.

Bear forth, o torch, judgement to the earth; 
And on your sublunar vessel, 
Be, o fiery flame, our rudder: 
Because the spirit is in a hostile ring: 
Because the world lies in evil; 
Because there is at the end of our paths 
A world more winged and more holy 
And the torch is captured by the brave; 
Because in torments Prometheus

Неси ж, о Факел, суд земле, 
И на подлунном корабле, 
Будь, пламень огненный, кормилом, - 
Затем что дух в кольце немилом, 
Затем что мир лежит во зле, - 
Затем что есть в конце путей 
Мир окрылённый и святей, 
И светоч смелым завоеван, - 
Затем что в муках Прометей

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64 Ivanov, quoted in Bird, *The Russian Prospero*, 113.
66 Dithyrambs are ancient Greek hymns sung in honor of Dionysus, often with dance accompaniment.
Awaits, o people, fiery tidings!  
He is still not reconciled and still not unbound!  
. . .

And you are to await  
By the bridal chamber  
At midnight  
The god who will come;  
O, the flames  
Of the stormy spirit in the darkness,  
The world of Chaos,  
The silent calls! . . .

Lay the wedding ring  
Lay on the purple seabed;  
Reveal, O stormy tempest,  
In the azureness: The Face!

From the native chaos,  
Look - a Star, a Star!  
From an irreconcilable No  
Arises a blinding Yes!

After Skryabin’s death Ivanov began writing an epic poem, “Man” (Человек), which is reminiscent of the poetic text of Prefatory Action. Robert Bird, an Ivanov specialist, believes that the poem was a defense and extension of Skryabin’s ideas for Prefatory Action and Mysterium.68 This work is discussed further in Chapter 5, on the “afterlives” of Prefatory Action.

**Resonances with Other Dramatic Works**

Skryabin left no clues as to the relationship between his libretto and musical sketches, but we can compare the dramatic, mystical, and in some ways, primitivistic nature of its story to other works.

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67 Ivanov, quoted in Bird, *The Russian Prospero*, 60-61. (Bird’s translation)  
In many ways, the story of *Prefatory Action* mirrors Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. More than just a love story, *Tristan und Isolde* is a deeply psychological, religious, and mystical drama. The protagonists’ all-consuming immersion in one another creates the experience of an almost higher reality, as Joseph Kerman describes it:

> All the appurtenances of ordinary existence are sloughed off: the subsidiary feelings, convention, personality, reason, and even life itself . . . death is another grandiose symbol: of the final mystic ascent, evaporating into a supreme nothingness, partaking of the divine, unworldly essence of Love.

As in Skryabin’s theories on the transformative powers of ecstasy, in both *Prefatory Action* and *Tristan und Isolde*, male and female characters complete one another to create an all-consuming passion. Through Isolde’s final transfiguration scene, which takes place over her lover’s dead body, the opera achieves the same ecstatic union of death and love that is realized throughout *Prefatory Action* in male/female conjoining and rebirth (Masculine/Feminine voices, Ray/Wave, Prophet/Death), culminating in humanity’s loving embrace of death and ecstatic rebirth in heaven. A major difference between these two dramatic works, however, is the role of the individual. Whereas *Tristan and Isolde* is entrenched in egotistical individualism – the passion of two particular characters – Skryabin’s drama is the story of all humanity. Even the love between the only semi-independent characters, the Prophet and Death, is extremely impersonal, pre-ordained, and ceremonial.

It is entirely possible that Wagner’s music drama influenced Skryabin’s libretto. He admired Wagner’s works; his personal library contained the entire *Ring* cycle, as well as *Tristan und Isolde* arranged for piano. The Skryabin archives hold many Parisian programs from the early 1910s, showing that Skryabin’s symphonic works were performed alongside Wagner’s with more frequency than any other composer.

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70 Ibid.
The ritualistic character of *Prefatory Action* also has immediate similarities to Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and *Les Noces*, very different types of works. Both Skryabin’s and Stravinsky’s dramatic works from this period depict communal rituals that de-emphasize individuality, and the community is obliged to fulfill roles that are passed down to them through ancestry.\(^{71}\) *Prefatory Action* takes this same focus on ritual and history, but it broadens the perspective considerably; instead of ethnographically curious observers, the participants are presented with their own ancestral history - that of the entire human race - and placed in obligatory roles as a result of predestination. Skryabin likely never saw *The Rite of Spring*, and he seems to have been largely unaware of Stravinsky’s work (see Chapter 4), though the piece was so immediately famous that he must have heard of it while working on *Prefatory Action*.

The concepts behind the libretto and performance of Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action* are also similar to Charles Ives’s unfinished *Universe Symphony*, which Ives worked on sporadically from 1911 to 1928.\(^ {72}\) Ives’s piece was planned in three parts, the first relating to the past, a creation story, the second representing the present, focusing on nature and humanity, and the third, a vision of the future in which humanity would rise into spiritual realms.\(^ {73}\) Ideally, Ives’s work would be performed by two orchestras on twin mountaintops overlooking a valley. This history of humanity, ending in spiritual ascendance through music, is so immediately comparable to Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action* that it is hard to imagine they were unaware of one another’s works, though these respective pieces seem to have been conceived simultaneously.\(^ {74}\) While Ives owned many scores of Skryabin’s piano pieces, it

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74 While Ives doesn’t seem to have been interested in Theosophy himself, he was close to Henry Cowell, who had some Theosophical connections, namely with the poet John O. Varian. Paul C. David, “From American Ethnographer to Cold War Icon: Charles Ives through the Eyes of Sidney Cowell,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59/2 (Summer 2006), 399-457.
is unlikely that he would have had access to Sabaneyev and Schloëzer’s publications, which were not available in English translation during his lifetime.

Whereas Skryabin’s libretto focuses more on the human experience, humanity’s relationship to death, and predestination, Ives’s *Universe Symphony* was meant to emphasize nature. Ives wrote much of the work in the Keene Valley in the Adirondack Mountains and was particularly inspired by the visual impact of the landscape. His sketches show two simultaneous musical sections, one representing the earth and the other, the skyline. Secondary sources say that Skryabin also intended nature to play a role in his performance, though exactly how is unclear. The one section where nature is mentioned in the *Prefatory Action* libretto is very brief compared to the rest of the work.

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CHAPTER 4

THE PREFATORY ACTION SKETCHES: OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

And God resembled man as if his double.
So did I see Scriabin at his piano.

-Konstantin Bal’mont

Survey of the Literature

The Prefatory Action sketches have received far less attention in academic scholarship than
have the concepts and ideas behind the piece. This is, I believe, partially because Sabaneyev’s and
Schlozer’s monographs (which are the basis for most scholarship on the composer, make many
assertions about Skryabin’s purported philosophical theories concerning Prefatory Action and
Mysterium, but contain almost discussion of the sketches. This lacuna also stems from the
comparative inaccessibility of the manuscript for many scholars; it has been housed in the Scriabin
Museum in Moscow since its foundation in the composer’s own house. There have been three
studies, to my knowledge, that have examined the sketches in some relative detail.

In 1971 French musicologist Manfred Kelkel published an article about the sketches, “Les
esquisses musicales musicales de l’Acte Préalable de Scriabine.” It relates the story of Kelkel’s long-
distance contact with the Scriabin Museum and his discovery that, contrary to popular Western
musicological belief, there were 53 rather than 5 surviving pages of Prefatory Action. Examining a
copy of the sketches, he focuses on comparing Skryabin’s achievements in atonality to those of
contemporary composers; he is particularly interested in the stacks of 12 or more notes that appear
throughout the sketches. Kelkel interprets these as “chords,” as meant to be sounded (though I

1 Прорвались влева звуки-чародеё.; Запела Воля всклицком слитных воль.; И светлын Эльф, созвучнойей король.;
Вьан из звуков тонкие камен. . . И пиш толпы. И был певчим гром.; И человеке Бог был dreiийком.; Так
Скрябина я видел за роялью.
Konstantin Bal’mont, quoted in Tamara Eidelman, “Alexander Scriabin” Russian Life 55/1 (2012), 23. (Eidelman’s
translation)
disagree) and concludes that Skryabin was the first to write a chord with all pitches sounded simultaneously. Kelkel expands a bit on his analysis eight years later in his book *Alexandre Scriabine: sa vie, l’ésotérisme et le langage musical dans son oeuvre*. Here, he reproduces several pages from the sketches and comments briefly on the overwhelming presence of the octatonic scales, preference for symmetrical scales, the presence of the mystic chord from the *Prometheus* symphony and similar sonorities, and the prevalence of polyrhythms.

In the last few pages of George Perle’s 1984 article “Scriabin’s Self-Analyses,” which considers the octatonic scale and orthography in Scriabin’s late works, Perle asserts that Skryabin’s sketches for *Prefatory Action* demonstrate that the composer, like Schoenberg, was trying to create a “precompositional structure embracing the totality of pitch classes.”

Simon Morrison, whose invaluable article “Skryabin and the Impossible” has been summarized in more detail elsewhere in this dissertation also examines the sketches. Considering Sabaneyev’s description of Skryabin’s writing process at the piano, Morrison observes that much of the character of the work was improvisatory, and that the fragmented nature of the sketches shows that the composer wrote down far less that he had already composed mentally. Noting the many sonorities throughout the sketches that are strikingly similar to the mystic chord, Morrison shows how *Prefatory Action* expanded upon the composer’s previous experiments with harmonic stasis. He expands Perle’s discussion of octatonicism in the sketches and asserts several possible relationships between the libretto and the sketches based on the appearance of passages from op. 74.

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My primary goal here is to present an in-depth, and comprehensive overview of this manuscript, including the general layout and ordering of the pages, notation, compositional process, harmonic language, voice-leading, and common motives and melodies. These observations provide insight not only into this piece but into Skryabin’s late style. This chapter begins broadly and becomes progressively more analytical. Examples are chosen to represent common practices and features throughout the work. Then the sketches are compared to Skryabin’s late published works, then to works by contemporary composers so as to create a more precise historical context for a composer so often considered only in isolation.

**Format and Notation**

The Scriabin Museum has graciously provided me with color scans of the *Prefatory Action* sketches, and this study is based upon that PDF file.

**Pages and Paper**

This pdf copy begins with what looks like a red leather, embossed cover with the composer’s name and the title of the work. Until 1918 Skryabin’s name was spelled with a “ъ” at the end, absent here, so we can assume that this cover was created well after the composer's death in 1915 (see Figure 4.1). The PDF shows single pages at a time, which appear to be unbound.

I have 53 pages, not including the cover. Each page has two separate types of numbering, both seem likely to be posthumous. The first set of numbers runs from 1 to 55, written at the top center of each page. The second set appears consistently at the left center of each page, beginning with the letters "CK" (the first two letters of Skryabin's last name in the Cyrillic alphabet). These CK

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6 In 1918 the Bolsheviks implemented a spelling reform. One of the many changes that happened was that the silent hard sign “ъ” was declared redundant. Afterwards the letter remained in the language for only a few phonetic functions. Alexandra Jaffe, *Orthography as Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity, and Power* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012): 48-49.
numbers begin at 121 and end at 181 (see Figure 4.2). Throughout this dissertation I will refer to these pages by the top number, because previous scholars have also used them as a point of reference.

![Figure 4.1. The cover of the *Prefatory Action* sketches. The Russian translates to “A. Skryabin Prefatory Action.”](image)

Figure 4.1 shows missing page numbers and discrepancies between the two numbering systems. Page 18 is missing, which corresponds to the placement of the absent CK138. However, where the top numbering series is missing only page 44, the CK series has a gap of 7 pages between CK163 and CK171. It may seem, at first, that pages are missing from this copy. More likely, however, the top numbering system counted a blank page if it was the verso of one with writing on it, and the CK cataloger counted all pages in the collection, regardless of whether they were blank. The regular alternation of marks on pages 23-37 show that the composer wrote on the front and

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7 I do not know why it begins with 121, but it could be that the CK numberer was labeling all extant sketches in Skryabin’s oeuvre.
back of each page. Based on the fairly consistent appearance of the paper maker’s markings\textsuperscript{8} and number of staves, pages can be sorted into the recto and verso of a single sheet (though unbound). This supports the theory about the number of missing pages, since the missing numbers, added to the pages I have, equal an even number (acknowledging that Skryabin only wrote on one side of the last page, which is the only one with 32 staves). Blank pages were probably never scanned and distributed. Moreover, Kelkel also claimed to have 53 pages in 1971 and he also received his copies from the Museum.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{example.png}
\caption{The first page of the \textit{Prefatory Action} sketches with two different numbering types circled in red.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{8} Occasionally, my copies include enough of the margins to show the manuscript paper company mark at the bottom of the page. I have labeled them, in order of appearance, X, Y, and Z (see fig. 9.3) numbers in figure 9.4. The paper company Skryabin used was P. Jurgenson, which was one of the largest producers of manuscript paper in Russia and Skryabin’s publisher at the time.
Figure 4.3. A chart comparing the two different numbering systems in the sketches along with the number of staves and paper marks on each page. Two sides of the same piece of paper are indicated with gray and white. Pages I do not have, but have assumed to be blank pages, are shown in yellow. Darker and lighter yellow correspond to page sides. Other discrepancies are highlighted in red. Paper marks are noted when present, but very often the copies provided for me cut off the bottom of the page where the paper maker’s mark would be.
That the numbers of staves change seemingly randomly from pages 47 to 55 might indicate that they were in no clear order before being numbered after the composer’s death. There are no examples of music continuing from one page to the next (see section on “Format,” which explains the fragmented nature of these sketches), which also suggests that the composer had no particular order in mind. There is one case, however, between pages 24 and 25, where the composer seems to have drawn an arrow from one page to another, which may indicate that he had some expectations concerning the order of these pages (see Figure 4.4). Moreover, the fragments of the late published works that appear in these sketches are all gathered in the first half of the document, rather than scattered randomly throughout, which supports the notion that the composer’s ordering, however loose, may have been preserved.

**Handwriting**

Skryabin used several types of pen and thick pencils in his sketches and never erased, only occasionally crossing notes out. There are many instances throughout the sketches of written words. Most of these are Italian musical abbreviations or solfege, used to clarify or change a particularly unclear notehead (see Figure 4.5). The letters “tr” for trill appear most frequently (see Figure 4.6). The Russian words “нап” (or) to indicate another optional note, melody, or passage, and “и.т.д.” (etc.), to show that a sequence or pattern should be continued, are also common (see Figure 4.7). On page 15 the composer wrote a fairly clear “перед голос” (before the voice) (see Figure 4.8), which could be a reference to a melodic voice, or possibly could indicate a connection to the libretto, as Simon Morrison has asserted. Other instances of written words are hastily scrawled

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9 On the first and last pages someone other than the composer (based on the handwriting style) has written “Prefatory Action” in Russian.
or faded and are, unfortunately, unintelligible both to me and the native Russian speakers I have consulted.¹¹

Notation

While Skryabin’s work is fairly clear compared to sketches by Beethoven, for example, there are still many instances where pencil markings have faded (see Figure 4.8, for example), and notehead placement, clefs, or accidentals are unclear. Without a tonal context, in many instances it is impossible to know what pitches were actually intended. However, since the composer often relies on strict intervallic patterns, octatonic scales, sequences, and in one case, a fugue, it is possible to correct obscurities within a reasonable margin of error. There are only a handful of clef indications throughout all 53 pages of the sketches; treble and bass clef are automatically assumed for any two staves beamed together. This assumption is supported by range, vertical intervallic patterns, and octatonic collections. For three-stave systems, treble-treble-bass (top down) is usually correct (see Figure 4.9).

There are no examples of time signatures throughout the sketches, but vertical lineup usually is fairly clear, and beaming often indicates simple or compound meter (see Figure 4.10). The composer does occasionally indicate triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets, etc., with a bracket and number, though they are more often assumed in the beaming and metrical context.

Format and Scoring

There are a variety of types of entries in the sketches. Approximately a quarter are drafts of chord progressions and scales without any metrical context (see Figure 4.11). The rest of the entries

¹¹ Special thanks to Dr. Nina Efimov for enduring this!
are extremely brief fragments of music, usually no more than one or two measures long. Rarely does a single fragment continue for more than one system. The longest continuous passage is the fugue on page 35, which lasts for three systems.

Since I assume the whole document features piano score, they were probably written at this instrument. This is supported, of course, by Skryabin’s extensive career composing for and performing on the piano, and also by Sabaneyev’s recollection of the composer’s private performance of Prefatory Action on the piano.\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{figure4_4.png}
\caption{An arrow drawn between pages 24 and 25}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{figure4_5.png}
\caption{Solfege syllables “mi mi” and “do♮” to clarify notation on pages 30 and 31 respectively.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{12} Leonid Sabaneyev, \textit{Vospominania o Skryabine} (Moscow: Klassika XXI, 2000), 325-6.
Figure 4.6. “tr” for “trill” on page 34.

Figure 4.7. The Russian words и т.д (etc.) and иди (or) appear frequently in relation to melodies and sequences. These examples are from pages 30 and 52, respectively.

Figure 4.8. “пред голос” (before the voice) (and another example of иди).
Figure 4.9. Ordered Interval Set $i<6, 4, 6, 5, 6, 4, 6, 4, 6, 3, 6>$ on page 14, which corresponds to clefs (from bottom to top) bass-treble-treble.

Figure 4.10. Page 14. There is no time signature here, but based on beaming, this passage is probably in 9/8.

Figure 4.11. Page 15. A harmonic progression sketch without metrical context.
Though the piano was a vital part of his compositional process, this work was not intended as a solo piano piece, both because it includes a libretto, and because all of Skryabin’s major, large-scale works are orchestral. Moreover, according to Schloezer, Skryabin imagined that a choir would be a major part of the performance. He intended to eventually arrange the piece for orchestra and choir, and may have been composing with that in mind. Quite often, his chords have 8 or 9 different notes represented at once and seem to span an superhuman range for the piano (see Figure 4.12), one that is even more extreme than his late piano works. In many passages in the sketches, the composer seems to be already imagining an orchestral arrangement.

**Style and Compositional Procedures**

**Compositional Process**

By examining the different types of entries in the sketches - ametric chords and musical fragments - the composer’s compositional process is often quite clear. He usually begins with a single chord or a progression, then uses it as the basis for several measures of music (see Figure 4.13), which he then revises several times, often keeping the bass part the same and changing the upper voices. Other times, rather than beginning with a chordal progression, he uses passages as a means of exploring a particular interval in the bass (see Figure 4.14), sometimes spending an entire

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page with the same two lowest notes. One can easily imagine the composer at the piano improvising on a chord or interval and jotting down ideas. Overall, this method of working out ideas shows extremely vertical thinking, which is particularly interesting considering several recent published discussions of his use of scales in late works.

Voices and Motion

Skryabin was extremely concerned, throughout, with showing contrapuntal voices, either distinguishing them by means of either stem direction or empty vs. colored noteheads. He was often so concerned with distinguishing voices that he obscures the notation; stems run into each other, or open noteheads do not fit into the metrical context (see Figure 4.15). It would seem easier to write on three or four staves at once, though he does this rarely, and usually only to indicate another optional bass or melodic part.

Figure 4.13. Page 45. The composer sketching chord progressions and using them as a basis for a musical fragment.
He also shows great concern for voice leading. Motion in all voices other than the bass is predominately chromatic and stepwise. In Figure 9.16, for example, we see a passage with almost exclusively half-step motion, and the largest interval within a single voice is a whole step. There are also common patterns in bass motion. When not experimenting with a static interval (as in Figure 4.14) or moving chromatically, the bass often moves by leaps of major and minor thirds, chromatic steps, and sometimes tritones (see Figures 4.13 and 4.17). This corresponds to his frequent use of octatonic collections. Chordal planing is also prevalent in the bass part, sometimes with groups of 3-5 notes, and at other times with just a single interval, often a tritone. Figure 4.18 shows a major triad in the bass transposed twice by minor third.
Scales, Collections, and Intervalic Patterns

Dmitri Tymoczko, in his article “Scale Networks and Debussy,” argues that early twentieth-century composers such as Debussy, Ravel, and Rimsky-Korsakov began to depart from tonality by using scales other than the diatonic as a point of reference when leaving traditional functional harmony behind.\textsuperscript{14} Tymoczko commonly finds what he calls “pressing scales,” in early twentieth-century works, which are characterized by 1) having no two consecutive half-steps, and 2) no two consecutive scale degrees that are larger than a whole step. He identifies seven such scales,

\textsuperscript{14} Dmitri Tymoczko, ”Scale Networks and Debussy” Journal of Music Theory 48/2 (2007), 220.
acoustic,\textsuperscript{15} diatonic, harmonic minor, major, and the octatonic, whole tone, and hexatonic collections.\textsuperscript{16} This nod to "scalar tradition" allowed composers to write non-pitch-centric music with tertian harmonies and mostly stepwise melody. Moreover, these scales provided compositional limitations.\textsuperscript{17}

Tymoczko demonstrates that many non-functional chord progressions from the fin-de-siècle period can be explained as derivative of an underlying scale.\textsuperscript{18} George Perle, in his article “Scriabin’s Self-Analyses,” as well as many others, have commented on Skryabin’s reliance on octatonic collections in his late works.

15 The acoustic scale is named for its resemblance to the upper partials of the harmonic series. An acoustic scale beginning on C would consist of C-D-E-F#-G-A-Bb-C
16 Ibid., 225-28.
17 Ibid., 220.
18 Ibid., 228.
19 Note: in the AM chord from page 52, there is the C is sharp from an accidental earlier in the system.
The *Prefatory Action* sketches strongly rely on pressing collections. There are several places throughout the sketches where the composer wrote out scales. These are most often octatonic, acoustic scales, and occasionally hexatonic scales. Sometimes scales follow other patterns that break the pressing scale mold. Page 47 is dedicated almost entirely to scales; more appear here than on any other page. Interestingly, not all of his “scales” are perfectly in ascending order but are octatonic anyway, which may mean he was thinking of them more as unordered collections, or as sketches of melodic patterns. Since the sketch pages were not bound, it is certainly possible that he used this scale page as a reference for other passages throughout. Figures 4.19 and 4.20 show page 47 of the sketches and transcriptions of several of the scales there. It is notable also that spelling is often unexpected (see section on “Spelling”).

Throughout the sketches, written-out scales are far less common than chords that are completely part of an octatonic collection. While there are instances of linear scalar thinking (see section on “Spelling”), Skryabin usually generates his collections in a vertical, rather than horizontal manner. It seems more likely that most of the time Skryabin was thinking harmonically, in terms of accumulative intervallic patterns that resulted in octatonic collections, rather than in terms of ascending scales. On page 40, for example, we see two “chords,” one beginning on C in the bass, and the other beginning on Eb in the treble clef. Each has a tritone, a perfect fifth, and a tritone above the first note (see Fig. 4.21). The result is an octatonic collection identical to the first scale on page 47. On page 28 he arrives at the octatonic collection with the ascending, ordered intervals i<4, 5, 4, 5, etc.>20; on page 27 stacking different types of fourths to create the octatonic collection, i<5, 4, 6, 5, 6, 4, 6, 4>. In other instances, a vertical stack of intervals has no clear pattern, but arrives at

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20 By ordered interval sets, I’m referring to a series of intervals. Since spelling here no longer relates to the tonal system, it is easier to describe these intervals by the number of half steps, rather than name them by size and quality. For example, it is more convenient (and less confusing) to describe a series of intervals, from the bottom to top note, as <4, 6, 3>, than diminished fourth, augmented fourth, and minor third.
an octatonic collection, nonetheless. Other interval stacks do not produce any definable collection, though occasionally they form an aggregate, stopping when all 12 pitch classes are heard (see Figure 4.22 and 4.23).

Figure 4.19. Page 47 of the sketchbook, which prominently features sketches of scales. Note: I have assumed treble clef for all staves on this page.

Figure 4.20. Transcriptions of several scales and collections from page 47. Numbers in red indicate intervals between notes.

Very frequently, ametric progressions of 3-7 chords use only pitches from a single octatonic collection, or each chord will represent a different octatonic collection. These are always written
with careful voice-leading in mind and sometimes have passing tones. Alternations between octatonic collections is fairly frequent. Page 16 offers a particularly interesting example of alternating octatonic collections being generated from motives at T3 and T6 transpositions (see Figure 4.24). Often, as on page 33, the bass clef part is entirely octatonic while the treble clef is not part of the collection (see Figure 4.25). Since the octatonic and hexatonic scales share a subset of four notes, Skryabin tends to exploit this similarity. The hexatonic scale appears occasionally, usually in short motives and melodies (see Figure 4.26).

**Orthography**

In addition to prevalent octatonicism and polyrhythms, Skryabin’s late works are known for their unusual orthography, which has been a subject of some discussion amongst theorists and composers. In Perle’s “Scriabin’s Self-Analyses” and Wai-Ling’s response, “Orthography in Scriabin’s Late Works” these authors explain that much of Skryabin’s unusual orthography stems from an underlying octatonic scale, and transpositions thereof. Perle and Wai-Ling produce compelling evidence for scalar thinking underlying Skryabin’s compositional process. Their theories sometimes apply to the sketches, but more often than not, scalar spelling is not applicable. It is possible that Skryabin regularly made spelling changes to final drafts of his manuscripts, and that the spelling in his sketches is not as polished as some of his later publications.

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We might first consider the Skyrabin’s options for spelling octatonic scales. There are only a few ways to spell one conveniently - that is, with a minimum number of accidentals (see Figure 4.27). There are several passages throughout the sketches that correspond to traditional octatonic scalar spellings like those above, with four or fewer accidentals. Most often, as far as notation is concerned, it is the octatonic scale on E beginning with a whole step. Figure 4.28 shows one of several passages that use the same orthography as this scale.

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22 This same scale is also written on page 46 of the sketches.
Examples such as these, which seem to correspond to scalar spelling, are fairly rare. Spelling is usually inexplicable in terms of scales or transposition. Returning to Figure 4.24, we might at first assume that the Oct. (0,1) scale in green is using the C# octatonic scale beginning with a whole step (C# - D# - E - F# - G - A - B♭ - C) since this spelling is consistent throughout the underlying whole note chords. In the fourth measure, however, Skryabin uses an E♭ in the Oct. (0,1) motive in the treble clef, rather than a D#, contradicting the scalar spelling.
Figure 4.23. Prefatory Action sketches P14 S5-7. Collection generation via interval patterns.

Figure 4.24. Page 16. A transcription of a passage that shows the alternation of octatonic scales and transposition of motives by minor third and tritone. (Orthography here is discussed in the subsequent section)

Figure 4.25. Page 33. A transcription of a passage with entirely octatonic lower voices and non-octatonic upper voices.²³

²³ Several notes and durations in the upper voices, as well as the meter are unclear in the original notation.
While Wai-Ling’s article on orthography manages to explain many examples of unusual spelling as transpositions of an original scale, Skryabin’s transpositions in this example are not exact. The last interval of the Oct. (0,1) motive are spelled as a minor third in the first two transpositions, but then as an augmented second in the last iteration. Similarly, the Oct. (0,2) motive is spelled at first as an ascending minor third with a descending diminished fourth, but the other two transpositions are spelled with a minor and major third.

It seems likely that scholars have been putting too much stock in Skryabin’s supposed neat scalar thinking as a generative force for his compositions. Neither, however, is his orthography necessarily generated by the ordered interval sets. In Figure 9.21, for example, there is a consistent pattern of intervals, but tritones are spelled either as augmented fourths or diminished fifths, and interval 7 is spelled either as a perfect fifth, or as a doubly diminished sixth (a bizarre choice!).

24 Note: The notation in the bass clef for this fragment is particularly unclear for a few notes.
Figure 4.27. The most orthographically convenient ways to write octatonic scales, i.e. without double sharps or flats, beginning on a half step, then on whole step. Scales marked with a red check have four accidentals or fewer.
The octatonic scale this pattern generates, moreover, does not rigidly stick to one note per letter name, as it might in traditional scalar spelling. Figure 4.29, for another example, is a passage that uses the octatonic collection almost exclusively in terms of pitch, but orthographically corresponds to no traditional spelling of the scale (compare to Figure 4.27). I think it more likely that Skryabin wrote in his sketches as he did in his journals, that is, only for himself. He was more focused on the sounding product than with orthographic details and underlying scales.

25 Note: While note heads are clear in the original of this passage, vertical lineup is not.
Figure 4.29. Page 31. A transcription that, aside from two A naturals (which might be Ab if we assume that accidentals carry), uses only Oct. (1,2) but does not correspond to any traditional spelling of an octatonic scale.

Harmony

The mystic chord (see Figure 4.30) appears frequently in the sketches in various transpositions and inversions. It often appears with the inclusion of a perfect fifth up from the root, making it completely part of the acoustic scale collection, one of the pressing scales (see Figure 4.31). This happens so often, in fact, that it might be more appropriate to think of it as an acoustic collection than the mystic chord, as it is usually discussed in the literature on Skryabin’s late works.

Figure 4.30. The mystic chord from the *Prometheus* symphony

A particularly striking example of the use of the mystic chord/acoustic collection appears on page 45 of the sketches (see Figure 4.32). First, we see the mystic chord spelled in (what we generally consider) its traditional form of stacked fourths, then we see the mystic chord on an A, re-notated for smooth voice leading.
Figure 4.31. Page 24. A transcription of a passage that uses all the notes of the “mystic” chord and various transpositions, but includes a G, compared to an acoustic scale on C.

Following that are the notes of the mystic chord with the root of F (though in the sketches Skryabin has crossed out the original bass), then a chord with every note of the Db acoustic scale, then the mystic chord on Db in first inversion, or an acoustic scale with an added Ab. These rotations of the mystic chord/acoustic scale are reworked into a passage of music below the chords (the originals are shown in Figure 4.13 in the section on “Compositional Process”).

Towards the end of the sketches the octatonic scale is used less rigidly, and the goal for each passage seems to turn towards maximum chromatic saturation. Figure 4.33, for example, has all twelve notes in an extremely brief passage (this can also be seen in the example of chromatic motion in Figure 4.16). It is more common, however, to have every pitch class in a passage but one.
Fig 4.32. A transcription of a series of “mystic” chords on page 45, compared to the C, A, F, and D-flat acoustic collections. See Fig. 9.13 for the original handwritten passage and the music Skryabin derived from these chordal sketches.26

Figure 4.33. A transcription of a passage from page 45, which contains every possible pitch class, demonstrating extreme chromatic saturation.

Other times, discernible triads in a single voice part appear with no functional harmonic context (see Figures 9.18 and 9.34). These do not appear frequently, but they are interesting,

26 On the third chord of this passage, there is an F written in the bass, but the composer has crossed it out.
nonetheless. It may be that Skryabin was beginning to experiment with polychordal techniques, possibly even polytonality. This practice is also mostly confined to the middle and later pages of the sketches.

![Figure 4.34](image.png)

**Figure 4.34.** Page 33. A transcription of a passage with identifiable triads and seventh chords in an inner voice.

**Motives, Melodies, and Melodic Patterns**

The most common motives throughout the sketches include ordered interval series $i< -3, -1, -3>$ and $< -4, +6, -3>$, as well as a syncopated, rocking, chromatic motive that more often appears inverted after its first appearance (see Figure 4.35). All three fit within an octatonic collection, and the first is common to both the octatonic and hexatonic scales.

![Figure 4.35](image.png)

**Figure 4.35.** The most common motives throughout the sketches.

Chromatic motion is extremely common throughout most of these melodies, as are arpeggations of augmented and diminished triads. Many of the melodies are restricted to octatonic, hexatonic, and sometimes even pentatonic collections, and most show extreme chromatic saturation, representing every possible note, or every note but one or two in a very short space of time. While
rhythm is sometimes a little unclear, great rhythmic variety is at least apparent. Sequencing is also extremely common (see Figure 4.36).

![Figure 4.36. An example of sequencing/transposition in sketches page.](image)

**Fugue**

The fugal exposition on page 35 (see Figure 4.37) is the only known example of this by Skryabin aside from an unpublished piece of juvenilia from 1885. Fortunately, the strictness of the technique makes it easy to correct any obscurities in the handwriting. The fugue has four voices and two countersubjects. The subject itself contains every pitch but E♯ and E natural, which are the first two notes of answer 1, completing the aggregate. Aside from the E♯ in measure 7, countersubject 1 is entirely octatonic. The answers are exact, and interestingly (though, perhaps, not unexpectedly), they enter a tritone apart. The two countersubjects are also transposed a tritone apart in their reappearances, though in the last two measures both countersubjects stop following their established patterns. While the spelling in the subject’s answers are transposed exactly, there are some perplexing discrepancies in the spelling of the countersubjects.

**The Late Works and the Sketches**

It is well known that fragments of Skryabin’s late published works appear in the first part of the Prefatory Action manuscript; Op. 72, *Vers la flamme*, op. 73, *Deux danses*, and op. 74, *Cinq préludes*, were all published in 1914, while Skryabin was working on these sketches. He seems to have developed some of his material for Prefatory Action into short piano pieces to supplement his income.
while focusing on the larger work. These concordances between the sketches and published works are invaluable as examples of finalized products from Prefatory Action, whose study is otherwise hampered by the lack of later drafts for comparison. They are also advantageous in the study of the late works; they are, to some extent, drafts of the published pieces, and can shed considerable new light on current analytical approaches to his late works.

Figure 4.37. A transcription and analysis of the fugue on page 35 of the sketches.

Concordances between the published works and sketches have been studied most thoroughly by Alexander Nemtin, a Russian composer who, between 1971 and 1996 premiered
three movements of his orchestral “reconstruction” of Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action* (see Chapter 5).

According to musicologist Anton Rovner, Nemtin discovered four direct quotations from Skryabin’s late works as well as other general similarities between the sketches and Skryabin’s published works from the same time period in pages 1-20.\(^{27}\) I have six more concordances to add to Nemtin’s list (mine are marked with an asterisk). Examples from the *Prefatory Action* manuscript and sections of related music from the published works are provided in Figures 4.38 to 4.45. Considering the scope of all 55 pages of the sketches, these direct relationships to the published works are comparatively limited. The concordances listed here are often not exact quotations, but often sometimes only very generally similar to moments in the published works. In some cases (as in Figure 4.45), these fragments are related to several of Skryabin’s late works because he tends to recycle motives throughout his late oeuvre.

Selections from the sketches are referred to by top page number, “P,” and the number of staff number (from top to bottom), “S.” For example, P40 S8-9 would be page 40, eighth and ninth staves from the top.

1. *P1 S11-12* - Preludes op. 74 no. 1
2. *P4 S9* - Preludes op. 74 no. 4 (general resemblance)
3. *P5 S1* - *Guirlande*, op. 73 no. 1
4. *P5S9-10* - Op. 74 no. 3 mm. 1-5
5. *P7 S5-6*; Op. 74 no. 4 mm. 8-10
6. *P8 S8-9*; Op. 74 no. 2 mm. 1-3
7. *P15 S9*; Op. 73 no. 1 mm.13-16
8. *P20 S7-8*; Similar to openings of both Piano Sonata no. 9 and op. 74 no. 1 combined

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Figure 4.38. P11 S11-12 compared to op. 74 no. 1 mm. 1-2

Figure 4.39. P4S9-10, S11-12 compared to Op. 74 no. 4 mm. 1-3. The first detail illustration corresponds to beat 3 of the first full measure, and the second to beat 3 of the second measure.
Figure 4.40. P5 S1 compared to Op. 73 no. 1 m. 1

Figure 4.41. P5S9-10 compared to Op. 74 no. 3 mm. 1-5
Figure 4.42. P7 S5-6; Op. 74 no. 4 mm. 8-10

Figure 4.43. P8 S8-9; Op. 74 no. 2 mm. 1-3
Figure 4.44. P15 S9; Op. 73 no. 1 mm.13-16

Sonata 9:

Figure 4.45. P20 S7-8; Similar to openings of both Piano Sonata no. 9 and Op. 74 no. 1 combined
Process and Style between the Late Works and the *Prefatory Action* Sketches

The vast majority of the sketches do not function as drafts for published works. The late pieces, however, which were written simultaneously with the music for *Prefatory Action*, can flesh out our understanding of the musical style of this unfinished work. On the other hand, Alexander Nemtin believed that *Prefatory Action* differed enough from Skryabin’s previous compositions that these notations marked the beginning of a new period for him.\(^{28}\) Since opp. 72-74 only relate to the first twenty pages of the sketches, it is certainly possible that his style continued to develop and change in these sketches. How are the sketches similar to these published works, and how do they depart from what he had written before?

**Harmony:** Both *Prefatory Action* and op. 72-4 rely very heavily on octatonic and acoustic collections. The consistent and prevalent appearance of octatonicism in his works began (debatably) around 1910. In the pieces that utilize the octatonic and acoustic collections, usually entire passages or sections are restricted to a single collection, as in Figures 4.46 and 4.47 from opp. 72 and 74, respectively, though only op. 74 no. 3 uses a single collection throughout the entire piece. It is common in the sketches, as well, to have entire passages restricted to a single collection, but unlike

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the published works, different collections tend to alternate much more rapidly, as in Figures 4.47 and 4.48.

Figure 4.46. Op. 72, *Vers La Flamme* mm. 1-4. E acoustic collection.

Figure 4.47. Opening of op. 74 no. 1 and reduction. Collection: Oct (0,1).

Figure 4.48. Transcription of *Prefatory Action Sketches* P6 S10-11. Quickly changing collections - Octatonic and Whole Tone. Slurs are added to show decorating tones.
Bass Motion: Both the sketches and late works have bass lines that commonly move by minor third - in the published works, the left-hand chords have been arpeggiated. It is far more common in both the sketches and completed works to find longer passages with a single, unchanging note or interval in the left hand, as in op. 74 nos 2 and 3 and the beginning of op. 72 (see Figures 4.50 and 4.51). In the late works bass lines are highly disjunct and movement by step is fairly rare. While chromatic motion in motives and melodies is a hallmark of Skryabin’s late style, especially in the sonatas, chromatic bass motion is quite rare and can only be found in a few pieces, mainly as figuration in the left hand, as in opp. 41 and 45, for example. Chromatic bass motion is fairly common in the latter half of the sketch collection, however, and seems to have been something with which the composer was experimenting, especially a descending chromatic bass (see Figure 4.52). There are also many instances of bass motion by major third in the sketches.
Figure 4.50. Openings of op. 72 and op. 74 no. 2. Tritone and perfect fifth intervals in the bass.

Figure 4.51. Prefatory Action Sketches P26 S6-7 and P42 S4-5. Use of tritones and perfect fifth intervals in the bass in the sketches.
Forms in Skryabin’s late, short works, opp. 72-74 are fairly clear. These tend to introduce two or three brief sections with little or no transition between them. Sections are either alternated and briefly developed (as in opp. 71 and 72), or repeated at different pitch levels (as in opp. 74, for example). Figure 4.53 is a brief, formal analysis of op. 74 no. 5. The main idea of this piece is only two measures long, which is transposed to two different pitch levels throughout the piece. Three other, brief ideas in the piece are only a single measure each, and are transposed by tritone to complete the piece. This work consists of tiny building blocks, the same length as the very short entries in the Prefatory Action sketches, transposed at various levels to create a sense of forward motion on a larger level.

The forms of these late works may indicate that the Prefatory Action sketches are far more complete than they appear to be. It is telling that eight out of nine times, motives that appear in the sketches begin one of the published works. Though they consist of just a few brief measures, they seem to provide enough material for a short piece, since it was just a matter of assembling and transposing these fragments to create a complete piece. This is probably why Sabaneyev claimed that Skryabin was able to play much more of Prefatory Action than was written down, as he could likely improvise developments and transpositions of the notated fragments at the piano.
By examining the relationship between different types of entries in the sketches and comparing them to the late, published works, we can generally distill what Skryabin's compositional process might have been like.

1. Generate a collection by vertically stacking intervalllic patterns.
2. Use rotations and transpositions of these collections to create a harmonic progression of 6-7 voices with 4-6 chords and smooth voice leading.
3. Derive a melody or motive from this progression, creating a brief passage of a few measures.
4. Write several variations on this passage, sometimes by arpeggiating chords, using ostinati, adding complex rhythms to inner voices, and augmenting and/or diminishing several notes from the main melody to obscure the metrical context.
5. Finally, put several passages together to create a short work by transposing sections usually by T3 and T6 and slightly modify repetitions rhythmically to introduce thematic transformation. This is the step we see evidence of between the sketches and published works.

**Collectional and Dominant Harmony Approaches**

In his article “Scriabin’s Seventh Piano Sonata: Three Analytical Approaches,” Philip Ewell surveys common analytical methods applied to Skryabin’s later music (past op. 45) with the aim of uncovering some of Skryabin’s compositional approaches in these works. The first common method of analysis for Skryabin’s late works that Ewell discusses the analysis of these late compositions as journeys through different rotations of the octatonic scale to arrive back at the original collection at the end of the piece. This strategy works with the assumption that Skryabin is using collections consciously and in place of tonality. Another common approach is to examine the works from a more tonal point of view, searching for dominant-functioning chords (see Figure 4.54). This
perspective points out that many of Skryabin’s later harmonies feature minor sevenths and major thirds from the bass; this, coupled with bass motion by perfect fifth suggests these function as extended dominant harmonies. Eventually, into the op. 60 pieces, the bass ceases to resolve by fifth, and dominant constructed chords become the sole harmony, as if he eliminated the tonic completely (see Figure 4.55).

Barbara Dernova notes that in these works with dominant harmonies and the tonic “written out,” we find dominant constructed harmonies with roots a tritone apart. This “tritone link” produces a Neapolitan to dominant motion and negates the dominant’s harmonic function (see Figure 4.56)

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30 Ibid., 42.
Figure 4.53. Formal analysis of op. 74 no. 5 showing transposition of motives
Dernova believed that these dominant harmonies related to tonics that sounded in the imagination for the very late works. In pieces such as op. 74, as Ewell points out, no tonic can be rightfully applied and dominant constructed chords are not functioning as such.

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31 Reproduced from Ewell, “Scriabin’s Seventh Piano Sonata,” 38.
32 Reproduced from Ewell, “Scriabin’s Seventh Piano Sonata,” 43.
33 That particular assertion is a bit difficult to get behind.
34 Ewell, “Scriabin’s Seventh Piano Sonata,” 66.
Yuri Kholopov proposes the concept of the “mono-functional” sphere as a possible point of departure for Skryabin’s later compositions, shown in Figure 4.57. He claims Skryabin’s late works might be reduced to a series of dominant 7th chords with lowered 9ths. When the bass moves by minor third, outlining a fully diminished 7th chord, each harmony still contains a minor seventh and a major third. Bass motion by minor third is also extremely common in the sketches.

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35 Reproduced from Ewell, “Scriabin’s Seventh Piano Sonata,” 51
36 Ibid., 63-64.
37 Reproduced from Ewell, 64.
Dernova’s tritone link (Figure 4.56) produces a subset of the acoustic, whole tone, and octatonic collections, and both Kholopov’s mono-functional sphere example and the equivalent from the sketches (Figures 4.57) are fully octatonic. Kholopov asserts that collections such as the octatonic and whole tone in Skryabin’s music are entirely derivative from his harmonic practices, and are not an intentional use of the collection or a point of departure for compositional thinking.\textsuperscript{38}

While I find Kholopov’s argument particularly convincing, Skryabin’s compositional process in the sketches seem to contradict this theory since his collections are sometimes (though not always) conceived a priori. Figure 4.8 from page 14 of the sketches is one of many instances in the sketches where collections are generated by vertically stacking intervals; most often these turn out to be octatonic. These collections are occasionally used in chord progressions, which are then turned into fragments of music. Skryabin devotes considerable time to these vertical intervallic patterns, which might indicate that he viewed it as more of an experiment, and could have been a new addition to his compositional process. In the sketches, Skryabin seems to be intentionally moving through mutually exclusive collections at a much faster rate than in previous, published works, and also using descending major thirds, practices which do not always mesh with Dernova and Kholopov’s analytical approaches. It is possible that these were new practices for Skryabin, a departure from previous styles.

**Orthography**

Orthography in Skryabin’s late oeuvre has always been a contentious issue. Notice that in most examples of concordances between the published works and sketches (Figures 4.38 to 4.45), there are variances in orthography. Comparing the sketches to the published opus in Figure 4.58, we

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 66
see that the bass is changed from C to B# and in the treble staff, notes have changed from Db to C# and F to E#. It seems that in Skryabin’s compositional process, orthography was extremely changeable, and is not necessarily an indication of his compositional process. Figure 4.50 shows George’s Perle’s analysis of the last few measures of op. 74 no. 1, which develop the first measures of the piece as seen in Figure 4.58. Perle’s analysis implies that Skryabin wrote this passage with an A# octatonic scale beginning with a whole step in mind, but when compared to the original sketches for this work, the orthography no longer corresponds to scalar thinking. Nor, in the sketches, is orthography always the result of transpositions. The orthography may not be an indicator of underlying scalar thinking, but why the changes in spelling between the sketches and published works? Without intermediate sketches of these late published works, this question may not be answerable. It is possible that Skryabin was thinking pianistically - consider Figure 4.58. A pianist who read very intervallically might read a diminished fifth faster than an augmented fourth, which is a very unusual interval, and the right hand has been respelled to look like an A augmented chord. Even a theory of orthography aimed at making atonal sight-reading more straightforward would not work consistently throughout Skryabin’s late, published works, however, since there are so many irregularities.

**On a Scale of Schoenberg to Stravinsky**

Stravinsky and Schoenberg represent two radically different modernist styles developed over a period similar to Skryabin’s own departure from nineteenth-century musical language. Though Skryabin is often considered in isolation, comparing his late style to contemporary works by these two composers contextualizes *Prefatory Action* in terms of developments in 20th-century musical style.
Figure 4.58. A transcription of a passage from the Prefatory Action sketches P11 S11-12, compared to the opening of op. 74 no. 1.\textsuperscript{39}

Figure 4.59. Illustration of Perle's interpretation of the underlying scale of a few measures 11-14 of op. 74 no.1 based on the published edition.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} Notes marked in red are particularly unclear in the original sketch (see Figure 4.38)

\textsuperscript{40} Reproduced from George Perle, “Scriabin’s Self-Analyses” Music Analysis 3/2 (July, 1984), 106.
Schoenberg’s atonal period stretches from 1908-1921 and Skryabin’s (arguably), from 1911 to 1914. Characteristic of Schoenberg’s work from this period are the abandonment of a central tonality, dissonance without resolution, non-triadic harmonies, and cadences without basis in standard classical progressions. Upon first listening, many of these pieces sound strikingly similar to Skryabin’s works, especially Schoenberg’s three piano pieces, op. 11 (1911), which will be compared here to Skryabin’s op. 74 preludes.

In these two pieces both composers work primarily with non-triadic harmonies and extended tertian harmonies. An immediate harmonic difference, however, is Skryabin’s restriction of long passages to octatonic collections (in the case of op. 74 no. 3, an entire piece is based on a single octatonic collection), whereas Schoenberg’s work is far more chromatically saturated, not recognizably drawing from any particular collection. While both sets of pieces display considerable rhythmic variety, Skryabin tends to have more immediate rhythmic diversity at the foreground level, using a mixture of tuplets, syncopation, and a generally clear meter. Schoenberg’s op. 11 is far more metrically ambiguous, changing meters often and displaying extreme metric displacement. The second iteration of motive “B” (measures 5-6) in Schoenberg’s piece, for example, is highly syncopated, contradicting the perceived meter of the first hearing, whereas the repetitions of Skryabin’s “A” motive all enter on corresponding places in the measure (see Figures 4.60 and 4.61).

Formally, both composers rely heavily on small motivic units for the frame of the piece and feature block-like formal sections with little or no transitions, though Skryabin’s forms are much

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42 In works from 1907-1911, tonality might still be “implied,” though there are rarely tonal endings. Philip Ewell, “Scriabin’s Seventh Piano Sonata: Three Analytical Approaches” Indiana Theory Review 23 (2002), 46.
44 At least on paper. While Skryabin’s score often demonstrates unambiguous metrical patterns, every performer I’ve ever encountered adds such extreme rubato and accents according to their own tastes, making many of his late works sound completely ametric! Performances of op. 74 no. 1, for example, include an incredible array of rhythmic interpretation.
simpler and easier to follow. Schoenberg tends to use far more motives than does Skryabin, who restricts these short pieces to two or three, usually repeating the opening motive many more times, by far, than others (compare Figure 4.60 to Figures 4.61 and 4.53). The most crucial difference between Skryabin and Schoenberg’s style, however, is in the nature of these motivic repetitions—Schoenberg employs constant variation, whereas Skryabin’s repetitions are more often exact, or nearly so. The sense of progress or development in Schoenberg’s pieces relies heavily on variation, whereas Skryabin’s comes more from the juxtaposition of transposed sections.

Unlike with Schoenberg, Skryabin and Stravinsky did have some little personal contact. There is only a brief telegram of correspondence between Stravinsky and Skryabin, though they met at least once. Stravinsky’s letters show that he admired some of Skryabin’s work, though the latter composer apparently knew few of the former’s own works, at least by 1911. Stravinsky wrote in a letter to his friend Derzhanovsky regarding his meeting with Skryabin, “I was struck that he knew nothing of my works and talks about them using hearsay from others . . . he played me his latest sonatas, which I liked better than the latest Prometheus piece by far.”

Taking the famous Rite of Spring (1913) as an example of Stravinsky’s characteristic style during the 1910s, many similarities to Skryabin’s work become apparent. Stravinsky’s works from this period feature metrical displacement, polymeter, blocky forms, stratified layers, ostinati, modality, and octatonicism. Harmonically, Skryabin seems to have much more in common

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45 It consists of a very brief telegram of Stravinsky relating the train schedule for Skryabin’s planned departure to meet him in Switzerland, which never materialized - they did meet in person later on. In the post-script, Stravinsky congratulates Skryabin on his Sonata no. 7, which he claims to admire.


46 Мне залило, что он о моих сочинениях ничего не знает и говорит о них понаслышке со слов других ... Он наигрывал мне свои последние сонаты, что мне несравненно больше понравилось, чем непосредственные после Прометей" опусы.

Igor Stravinsky, quoted in footnote in Pis’ma A. N. Skryabinu, 80. (My translation)

with Stravinsky than Schoenberg, since Stravinsky also worked within more confined pitch sets, restricting layers to tetrachords, the superimposition of which often resulted in octatonic collections.\textsuperscript{48}

![Motivic Unit Analysis](image)

Figure 4.60. Schoenberg op. 11 no. 1 mm. 1-13 motivic unit analysis.

Like Schoenberg, both Stravinsky and Skryabin incorporate extensive motivic repetition at the foreground level into their works, but Stravinsky’s technique is more extreme, using stratified layers of ostinati to form a polyphonic texture. Both Stravinsky and Skryabin’s works feature clearly delineated formal blocks with little or no transition, though Stravinsky’s rapid changes of character and metric interruptions make these shifts more jarring than Skryabin’s. Both works show

unexpectedly augmented and diminished numbers of beats in motivic units with repetition; Stravinsky’s are more irregular, implying mixed meter, whereas Skryabin’s are reminiscent of sentence structure, and so they are slightly more predictable (compare Figures 4.62 and 4.63).

Figure 4.61. Skryabin op. 74 no. 3 motivic unit analysis.

The sense of “progress” in Stravinsky’s music comes from the lengthening, shortening, and rearrangement of blocks in successive repeats,49 which is similar to Skryabin’s, which comes mostly from the juxtaposition of transposed blocks of material.

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49 Van den Toorn, Stravinsky and the Rite of Spring, 99.
Figure 4.62. Skryabin, op. 74 no. 1 mm. 1-5. Number of beats in each repeated motivic unit.

Figure 4.63. Stravinsky, “Play of the Two Rival Cities” *Rite of Spring* arr. Piano 4-hands mm. 61-68. Number of beats in each repeated motivic unit.
CHAPTER 5
EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSION

Skryabin is dead.
How good for him!
How terrifying for us; lingering before the signs of his genius we are abandoned to such great temptation!
Our captivity here has become more agonizing! The riddle of life is still an enigma!

-N. Yevreinov

Epilogue: The Afterlives of Prefatory Action and Mysterium

In the wake of Skryabin’s unexpected death, many artists were deeply influenced either by the stories of Skryabin’s Prefatory Action and Mysterium, or by the unfinished libretto and sketches left behind in the Skryabin Museum. Though Skryabin himself never lived to realize his visions for these works, others after him attempted their reconstructions of the work or used available material from Prefatory Action and/or Mysterium for their own undertakings. Such projects range from the year after Skryabin’s death to its centennial.

Vyacheslav Ivanov’s Man

Robert Bird, a specialist on Vyacheslav Ivanov, persuasively argues in his monograph, The Russian Prospero that Ivanov’s poem Man (Chelovyek) was a development and continuation of Skryabin’s libretto for Prefatory Action. Though Ivanov never made an explicit connection between his own epic and Skryabin’s work, the poem is strikingly similar to the Prefatory Action text, and Ivanov did compare himself to the composer when defending Man from critics. Ivanov’s Man shares recurring symbols with Skryabin’s poetry, including the diamond, “the azure,” the wave, and

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1 Скрябин умер. Как хорошо ему! Как страшно нам, остающимся перед знаками его гения, оставленными нам на великий облак! Наш здешний плен становится еще томительный! Загадка жизни еще загадочный!
N. Yevreinov, quoted in V. G. Karatakina, Skryabin: Ocherk (St. Petersburg: Izdaniye N. N. Butkovskoi, 1915), i.

2 In his response to the critic Ustrialov, "In the life of art there is an inner morphological law which is often inaccessible to non-artists. Due to this law Scriabin, for example, must be innovative, while in the opinion of outsiders it is not that he must be but that he wants to be; what to him is necessity to them seems caprice" Ivanov, quoted in Robert Bird, The Russian Prospero: The Creative Universe of Vyacheslav Ivanov (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 2006), 113.
the ray. Both poems, too, eschew any type of conventional narrative in favor of esoteric allegory, and tell the history of mankind, beginning with the race’s past unity with God, and continuing through their individualization and fall into sin until they reach the earth.³

*Man* consists of sixty-four short poems in five parts; the first three sections were composed beginning immediately after Skryabin’s death in April 1915. Part 4 and an epilogue were written in 1918, then an additional conclusion was added right before its publication in the late 1930s.⁴ The titles of the five sections are as follows,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Part I: “I am”</th>
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<tr>
<td>Part II: God and Man “Thou Art”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part III: Two Cities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part IV: “Man is One”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part V: Epilogue⁵</td>
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Part 1 is divided into two sections, which Ivanov called the *meloi* and *antimeloi*. The first *meloi* describes mankind’s separation from God, and the *antimeloi* tells the story of Lucifer’s rebellion. In both cases the fall from Grace is a result of the assertion of individuality. In Skryabin’s libretto the appearance of a wave and ray of light accompany mankind’s individualization and gradual separation from God. In Ivanov’s *Man* the human rebellion begins when the race recognizes its reflection in water and becomes entranced by its own beauty, creating a muddy wave. Lucifer’s fall is triggered by the spark of a divine ray that strikes him by chance.⁶ From Ivanov’s Part I,

The one who said “Am” having said “I,”  
Has willed to the heir of the throne  
His diamond inscribed with the verb  
And the mystery of the Name.

But he himself has hidden in the depths of heaven.  
But as soon as the Morning Star read “I am.”  
In the light beam from the ring, the beam disappeared,

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⁴ Ibid., 102.  
⁵ Ibid., 104.  
⁶ Ibid., 105.
And his heart became like a prison.

Since you did not say “The Father and I am one”
O arrogant one, by stealing the beam
That melted the link
And scattered the chain of the universe.\(^7\)

As in Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action* text, unity is equated with God and the assertion of individuality equates with life on earth, and these are mapped onto a kind of cosmic cycle that requires resolution back to coming to God. Like Skryabin’s text, too, the poem follows the history of the human race from their origins in heaven to the present time, but it does not bring the story back around to divine unity.

Parts 2 and 3 focus on descriptions of unity in society and universal oneness. In Part 2 the narrator describes himself as a singer, and his song unites mankind - reminiscent of the recurring figure of the messenger and the lyre in *Prefatory Action*. In Part 3 a symbolic temple recurs, as do references to a cyclical, cosmological song. Ivanov also uses these sections to preach the achievement of true being by sacrificing selfhood in the common universal spirit of man.\(^8\)

Ivanov called *Man* a “mystery play,” in Russian, *misterii*, which is the same Russian title as Skryabin’s hypothetical *Mysterium*. Like Skryabin, Ivanov strove to fuse together art and religion with the greater purpose, “trying to transform art into a sacrament.”\(^9\) Bird argues that, unlike *Mysterium*, Ivanov did not think his poem would actually bring about the end of the world, but that he hoped, through his religious artwork, to spread knowledge and spiritual awareness as a kind of bridge to *Mysterium*, just like Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action*.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) Кто “Есть” изрек, нарекший “Аз,” - Свой, с начертанием глагола С тайной Имени, алмаз Судил наследнику престола А сам скрылся в глубь небес, но лишь проел “Аз есть” Деница В луце от перстия, луч исцел. И стало сердце - как теница. Почто “Отец и я одно” Ты не сказал. Укрыв, нынешний, Сей луч, препровождий звезду И цепь рассыпавший вселенной.
Ivanov, quoted in Bird, *The Russian Prosper*, 110. (Bird’s translation)

\(^8\) Ibid., 108.

\(^9\) Ibid., 111.

\(^10\) Ibid., 102.
Sergei Protopopov

A fairly obscure, initial reconstructive attempt concerning the music for Skryabin’s Prefatory Action was composed by Sergei Protopopov in 1948. Protopopov (1893-1954) was a Russian conductor, composer, theorist, and author of a successful book on Yavorsky’s music theories, written in 1930, titled Elements of Musical Language Structure. Protopopov worked with the remaining sketches and libretto to write Prefatory Action: Fantasia for Narrator, Choir, and Two Pianos. To fill in gaps in the considerably fragmented sketches, he drew on Skryabin’s late works, and he purportedly relied heavily on Yavorsky’s theory of modal rhythm in his work. Protopopov’s composition is in four parts and the orchestration features narrators who read parts of Skryabin’s libretto, solo singers, a choir, and two pianos. An orchestral version was planned but never completed due to Protopopov’s own untimely death. The piece apparently was not premiered until in 1992 in the Scriabin Museum in Moscow.

Manfred Kelkel

Manfred Kelkel (1929-1999) was a French musicologist and composer. He wrote most prolifically about modern French composers, especially the members of Les Six, and his musical oeuvre includes two symphonies, four concertos, and many other orchestral and chamber works. He also harbored a deep fascination with Skryabin’s works and wrote his dissertation on Skryabin’s late works. His book, Alexander Scriabine, His Life, Esotericism, and the Musical Language of his Oeuvre

11 This information comes from an article on the Izdatel’stvo Kompozitor website, http://ikompozitor.ru/book/785. This is the publishing company for the Russian Composer’s union. Apparently, they once published Protopopov’s Prefatory Action, though the edition is no longer available. To my knowledge, no recordings of this work have been made available to the public.
(Scriabine, sa vie, l'ésotérisme et le language musicale dans son œuvre), is one of the few published pieces of scholarship on Skryabin's Prefatory Action sketches.

Kelkel, having been commissioned to write a piece for the O.R.T.F. (Office de Radio Télévision Française), composed his op. 22, Tombeau de Scriabine (Skryabin's Tomb) based on Skryabin’s Prefatory Action Sketches. Although he did not claim the work was a reconstruction, he subtitled it “Symphonic Transmutations of Fragments of the Musical Sketches of Skryabin’s Last, Unfinished Work.” The work was originally written for solo piano, and was premiered by Henriette Pugit-Roget in 1972; it was later arranged for orchestra and premiered by the O.R.T.F. philharmonic orchestra in 1974. To my knowledge, recordings of the piano version have been released commercially at least three times: by Peter Jürgen Hofer in 2007 (Danacord), by Maria Letteburg in 2015 (C2 Hamburg), and Jean-Pierre Armengaud, also in 2015 (Bayard Musique).

The work is fairly clear in its separation of Kelkel’s work from its source material. It is in two parts; the first movement is “Prélude,” and the second, “Transmutations.” The Prélude is approximately five minutes long and sounds much like literal transcriptions of fragments from the sketches, with little or no transition in between and no clear form. “Transmutations” is considerably longer (twelve minutes) and is Kelkel’s development of Skryabin’s material, freely transforming and developing the Préludes in Skryabin’s late style. “Transmutations” is divided into six variations and a coda. Kelkel claimed that his variations were not “classical” but “a building up of structure through

17 Reynal, “Thème(s) et transmutations,” 295.
18 Ibid.
transformation of themes using a row, separations, and blending.” Kelkel imbued his work with mathematical significance by using relationships between the number of beats in the “Prélude” and “Transmutations.” For example, Philippe Reynal points out that the number of beats in the six variations are symmetrical (see Figure 5.1). The beats in variations 1-3 and variations 4-6 each add up to 217, which is the number of beats in the first movement, and the coda multiplied by 7 also equals that number.

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<tr>
<td>VII (coda)</td>
<td>310-322</td>
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Figure 5.1. Number of measures and beats in Kelkel’s Tombeau de Scriabine. Reproduced from Reynal’s article, “Thèmes et transmutations: Chemin vers Le Tombeau de Scriabine.”

Aleksander Nemtin

By far the most ambitious reconstructive attempt for Prefatory Action was written by composer Aleksandr Nemtin (1936-1999), who dedicated much of his life to completing Skryabin’s unfinished projects. After graduating with a degree in piano performance from the Molotov School of Music, Nemtin studied theory and composition at the Moscow Conservatory, graduating in

20 Reynal, “Thème(s) et transmutations,” 300.
21 Ibid.
In 1961 he began working with the new ANS Synthesizer, an electronic instrument housed in the Scriabin Museum at the time. While at the Museum, Nemtin began studying Skryabin’s sketches, which were freely available. Netmin wrote a reconstruction of an early, abandoned opera by Skryabin from 1905, *Keistut i Biruta* (1974) and, working together in correspondence with American scholar Faubion Bowers, wrote *Nuances* (1975), a one-act ballet using the music of Skryabin’s late piano works.

Nemtin worked on his reconstruction of the *Prefatory Action* sketches from 1970 to 1996. In a brief memoir on the subject Nemtin readily admits that the fragments are so rough that Skryabin’s work is essentially unrecoverable. He likens his project to that of an archaeologist trying to put together mere bones to give only a general, skeletal idea of what the original creature must have been like. In his work Nemtin claims to have relied on color/emotive associations from the *Prometheus* symphony as a “key” to Skryabin’s music. His process was to identify the tonic of a fragment in the sketches and then develop it in concordance with the emotion associated with that color in Skryabin’s work. Nemtin noticed that there were several small fragments in the *Prefatory Action* sketches that appeared in late published works (see Chapter 4) and decided that was license to draw freely from opp. 73 and 74. Nemtin could find no correspondence at all between the *Prefatory Action* libretto and musical sketches, so he used the libretto as a kind of covert program for the piece

23 The ANS Synthesizer is an electronic instrument designed by engineer Yevgeny Murzin in the late 1950s. It converts graphic scores into sound, utilizing a range of 720 different pitches. The composer draws on a glass plate covered with black mastic, and photoelectric cells and amplifiers interpret it in sound. Murzin gave the device Skryabin’s initials in honor of his musical/visual experiments with the *Prometheus* symphony. The instrument is now kept in the Glinka Museum. Stanislav Kreichi, “The ANS synthesizer: Composing on an Electronic Instrument” *Leonardo* 28/1 (1995), 59-62.
24 Bowers wrote a biography of Skryabin, first published in 1969.
25 Sichugova, foreword to *Aleksandr Nemtin*, 10.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 89, 93. Nemtin does not mention his sources for the color/emotion correspondences, though there are many and they are contradictory. How Nemtin managed to find tonics in these primarily atonal fragments is also difficult for me to understand.
rather than incorporating it into the music. Because there was so little connecting material available between fragments, he admits having to constantly fill in gaps with his own invention based on what he interpreted to be Skryabin’s late style.\textsuperscript{29} Though Nemtin originally intended to write a twenty-minute piece, the work grew until his final product totaled over two and a half hours of music in three parts, I: “Man” (completed 1971), II: “Humanity” (1975), and III: “Transfiguration” (1996).\textsuperscript{30}


**Figure 5.2.** Title page to the Schirmer edition of Nemtin’s Prefatory Action\textsuperscript{31}

The work is scored for orchestra, piano, organ, choir, and colored lights,\textsuperscript{32} but the piano is featured so often that it sounds much like a concerto, especially the first movement, in which extended piano solos are often complete (or nearly complete) transcriptions of pieces from

\textsuperscript{29} Nemtin, \textit{Aleksandr Nemtin}, 93-95.


\textsuperscript{31} The full score of Part I is freely available online here: https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/prefatory_action_44356/1?e=8906278/5009062. (accessed 7/13/2016).

\textsuperscript{32} Sichugova, foreword to \textit{Aleksandr Nemtin}, 10.
Skryabin’s op. 73 or op. 74 pieces. The majority of the third movement appears to be fantasias on op. 74 no. 4 arranged for piano/organ duet. There are, of course, recognizable borrowings from the sketches, as well. The third movement, for example, also features a considerably developed version of Skryabin’s fugue from page 35. The choir is used sparingly and sings only non-lexical vocables; in his article on this piece, Anton Rovner claims Soviet authorities would not have allowed Nemtin to use Skryabin’s original text because of its occult flavor although this particular assertion contradicts Nemtin’s memoirs on the topic.

Though Nemtin readily admits in his memoirs that his work probably sounds nothing like what Skryabin intended, the project was marketed as the reconstruction of Skryabin’s never-before-heard Prefatory Action. The edition, published by G. Schirmer, does not even list Nemtin as a composer, but as an editor (see Figure 1)! Part I premiered in 1973 at the Moscow Conservatory and was subsequently performed all over the world, including Japan, West Berlin, Australia, and a performance in the United States by the San Francisco Philharmonic. A recording of the entire work was released by the Decca label in 2000 with pianist Alexei Lubimov, the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy. The piece received a mixed reception. It is hard not to be sympathetic to Nemtin’s situation - he might not have gotten the work performed at all if he had claimed authorship for himself, but as a result of his having misrepresented the reconstructive aspect of the piece many critics seem more concerned with its authenticity than the music itself. To take two reviews as examples of the issues it raised,

> Of course, the main question is, “Does it sound like Scriabin”? Well, yes and no . . . Nemtin is a late 20th century composer and aspects of his own personality do appear despite his desire to act merely as a musical “medium.”

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34 Ibid., 15.
35 The full recording can be heard on YouTube.com: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4YSysUn-Bk
One has 90% Nemtin and at most 10% Scriabin. In such a situation, is it valid to offer us this kind of presentation? Are we not dealing here with some kind of counterfeit? How would Scriabin have composed the work if he had lived longer? Nobody knows . . . Personally I prefer the intellectual honesty of Manfred Kelkel . . .

**Scriabin in the Himalayas**

On June 21, 2015, the hundredth centenary year of the composer’s death, “Between Friends,” a London-Based multi-media art group, along with “Quintessentially Travel” and “Blue Shield,” presented a concert of Skryabin’s music at the Thikse Monastery in Ladakh, India. No musical reconstructions were used, rather, the program mostly consisted of Skryabin’s piano works from his entire oeuvre, his Symphonies nos. 1 and 3 arranged for piano four hands, and vocalises based on his piano works. Performers included pianists Matthew Bengston, Coady Green, Christopher Smith, and tenor Neil Latchman.

![Publicity poster for Scriabin in the Himalayas event](image)

*Figure 5.3. Publicity poster for Scriabin in the Himalayas event*

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To incorporate Skryabin’s multi-sensory vision of *Mysterium*, the monks of the monastery performed “sacred tantric dance” to Skryabin’s music. Interactive lighting fixtures were arranged around the piano, and French perfumer Michel Roudnitska developed various smells to be released at planned moments in the performance.

So as to include nature, performances were outdoors, and the two parts of the performance were given at different times of day - at high noon and sunset. The event took place on the summer solstice, representing the triumph of light over darkness. Inspired by Skryabin’s ideas and work, Roudnitska also created a perfume specifically for the event, blended from the scents of frankincense, nagarmotha, vanilla, jasmine, and jatamansi flower.

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39 All of this information is from [www.scriabininthehimalayas.com](http://www.scriabininthehimalayas.com). This website also features a beautiful, short documentary of the event - [www.scriabininthehimalayas.com/trailer](http://www.scriabininthehimalayas.com/trailer).
Conclusion

The musicologist performs the dual role of scholar and critic, facing both the responsibilities both of approaching material with a healthy skepticism and of elucidating a sincere meaning in art. Skryabin’s outlandish religious-artistic philosophies challenge the border between these two perspectives. The prevailing early scholarship on *Prefatory Action*, tends to mythologize the work and the story of its creation, sensationalizing it as a chronicle of the composer’s madness. However, by contextualizing the composer’s beliefs—as asking how and why he believed that the end of the world was both possible and desirable—I’ve shown that the work is both internally logical and expressive. Not only is *Prefatory Action* artistically satisfying in its own right, but its complex premise is relevant both to biographical studies of the composer, the interpretation and analyses of his late works.

Though he has been judged harshly for it, I think Skryabin was brave to construct his own religious-scientific ontology of existence rather than blindly accepting those handed down to him. In his study of the German Transcendentalist School, Skryabin came to internalize the concept of an illusory reality. Based on empirical study of his own consciousness, along with Wilhelm Wundt’s experimental psychological study, Skryabin determined that what appeared to be the world around him was really a subjective environment created in the brain through the perceiver’s willful acts of recognition and differentiation. It is a fluid and subjective conceptualization of the experience of reality as a creative and willful act. This constructive process makes individuals “God” of their personal realms, limited only by the simultaneous constructions of “co-existing” wills. Skryabin’s conclusions were based on current philosophical, psychological sources, and current religious practices of the time.40 The “madness” commonly attributed to him lay in his optimistic belief that one might go beyond mere recognition of the self’s imprisonment in a harsh reality and actually move past the limited experience of the world through the medium of the body, reaching an

40—At least, until the “co-existing wills” part.
existence without the barriers between individual minds. In this, humans would be raised to free creation, rather than limited to constructing their experiences within the confines of the material world.

Helena Blavatsky, author of the original Theosophical literature, based much of her writing on the same concepts - one of the reasons Skryabin found Theosophy so appealing. She presented “evidence” of various planes of existence beyond the material world and demonstrated the underlying unity of man. Her comparative study of religions focused on the commonalities between world mythologies, in order to find the “truth” behind death and universal design. While the quality of her research was suspect, even during Skryabin’s time, the composer took it for truth - it corresponded so well with his own research on the illusion of reality and, more importantly, addressed the potential for an enhanced life and freedom from the spirit’s corporeal imprisonment.

Skryabin outlined his hybrid cosmological scheme and the cyclical history and future of mankind in his libretto to Prefatory Action. Humanity is presented as existing within an eternal cycle of unity with God and estranged separation in individual bodies. He understood that over millions of years the race moved from one stage to the next, traveling between heaven and earth. The process of individualization involved acts of recognition, of both sensations and other consciousnesses, but these actions separated humankind from God. According to Skryabin, at the present moment, we find ourselves at the point furthest away from God; having forgotten that we were once One, individuals struggle among one another, causing suffering and strife. As Skryabin understood it, terrible state would inevitably be overcome as humans shed their bodies, sensations, emotions, and consciousness, on the path back to heaven.

Skryabin considered art the most direct path to spiritual development, that it could be used as a tool to pry humanity from its tortured condition and advance the race along the evolutionary path towards unity once more. In order to do so, the artwork in question would need to stimulate as
many senses as possible to move a spiritually educated populace to ecstasy. If all humans could experience this moment of perfect bliss, in which they recognized and distinguished nothing, barriers between individual minds would be lifted, and they could once more become one, regaining their freely creative existence in a universe free of conflict.

Skryabin called this hypothetical artwork, which existed purely in speculative conversations with friends, *Mysterium*. Conceptually, *Mysterium* hinged on the willful participation of the whole race, something that could never be accomplished without religious-artistic spiritual education.

*Prefatory Action* was a work aimed at this more practical, educational goal, to take place in the near future. The piece would depict the story of *Mysterium*, the ritual in the Indian temple that would recollect mankind’s history and the final ecstasy in which humans would move on to the next plane.

Though *Prefatory Action* was intended to demonstrate a counterpoint of all senses in art, the only work Skryabin completed, aside from the libretto, was 53 pages of musical sketches. Like Schopenhauer, Skryabin felt that music, being the most ephemeral of the arts, was most closely related to reality beyond human comprehension, understanding sound was essentially vibration, Skryabin believed it had the capacity to unify bodies and move and change physical matter.

A study of the *Prefatory Action* sketches reveals the composer’s compositional process and its close stylistic relationship to his late published works, especially the op. 74 preludes. While there are many analytical approaches to Skryabin’s music, including analyses from tonal perspectives, Skryabin usually generated octatonic and acoustic collections from patterned stacks of intervals and used rotations and subsets of these collections as the basis for musical fragments. Combined with Skryabin’s characteristic polyrhythmic style and lyrical melodies, the work demonstrates a radical musical aesthetic, akin to Stravinsky’s progressive pieces from the same time period.

Eugene Zamyatin’s short science fiction story, “The Cave” (1922) describes a distant future, in which the sun has died. Civilized society unravels as the remaining humans struggle for fuel to
warm themselves. The score to Skryabin’s preludes, op. 74 make an appearance in this dystopia as a last, treasured vestige of culture, afforded the kind of reverence associated with Beethoven today. Skryabin’s music is eventually burned for warmth as the characters lapse into a desperate, primal state at the conclusion of the story, representing the tragic collapse of the height of civilization. The author associated these preludes, which were quite radical for their time, with control, civilization, and intellectualism. Zamyatin’s characterization of Skryabin and his music stands in sharp contrast to the prevalent representation of him today as a madman. I believe that for Zamyatin it was Skryabin’s abandonment of Romantic artistic aesthetics in conjunction with his epic, self-made cosmology, that made him a pioneer, the most treasured composer of the future, and a new classical model. While Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau rejected the past and embraced the future by taking art from its pedestal, Skryabin did the same by raising its importance to prodigious levels. At the heart of Skryabin’s *Prefatory Action* is the quest for the future. It epitomizes a strain of early modernist culture that rejected inherited religious and aesthetic values, while striving to create new rituals and a new culture, bringing the life of an idealized tomorrow to those at the time. Skryabin, in the most complete artistic expression of his cosmology, *Prefatory Action*, would have us sprint towards the next stage of evolution at the speed of light.

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APPENDIX A

IMAGE PERMISSIONS

Regarding Figure 2.7

Re: Your Website

Brian Hafer
Sat 10/17/2015 8:06 PM
To: Lindsey Macchiarella

Sure, Lindsey. Thanks for asking permission. Feel free to use the picture in your dissertation.

Regards,
Brian

On 10/17/2015 9:14 AM, Lindsey Macchiarella wrote:

Hello, Mr. Hafer,

I came across your picture/diagram of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” on google images (attached). I’m currently working on my dissertation on composer Alexander Scriabin, who was really into philosophy, and I thought this would make a good diagram for my philosophy chapter. Would it be alright if I used the picture in my dissertation? If not, I understand! Thanks for your time!

-Lindsey Macchiarella

Regarding Figure 5.4

Macchiarella, Lindsey

From: Jarek Kotonski <jarek@zamskarproductions.com>
Sent: Thursday, September 1, 2016 5:42 AM
To: Macchiarella, Lindsey
Subject: Re: Photo permissions?

Hello Lindsey,

My colleague Michael Hardy has brought it to my attention that you would like permission to use one of the photographs from our concert, 'Scriabin in the Himalayas', for your dissertation.

As the author I am perfectly happy for you to do so. Please credit it as (c) Jarek Kotonski / Between Friends.

Would it be possible to obtain a copy of your dissertation once it’s completed? The subject is of great interest to us as we are looking to develop our project / concept further.

With kind wishes,
Jarek
Hello!

My name is Lindsey Macchiarella. I am in the final stages of finishing my dissertation on Skryabin’s Prefatory Action at Florida State University. As an epilogue to my dissertation, I’m discussing reconstructions and events that involved Skryabin’s ideas for Prefatory Action and Mysterium after his death. I saw this picture (below) on your website, and I’d love to include it in my dissertation. Would that be possible?

* * * * *

Lindsey Macchiarella
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lindsey Macchiarella has a Bachelor of Arts from the University of California, Riverside (2010), and a Masters in Musicology and certificate in Early Music Studies from Florida State University (2012). She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Texas at El Paso (2015). She has taught courses in music appreciation, music history, world music, and early music performance at FSU and UTEP. She performs on recorder, baroque flute, and viola da gamba in Texas and New Mexico with Encanto, a professional early music group. She has presented at conferences including the Teaching Music History Conference (AMS Pedagogy Study Group), the Southern and Rocky Mountain regional chapter meetings of the American Musicological Society, and the AMS National Conference (2015).

Lindsey’s favorite composers right now are Skryabin, Stravinsky, and Ligeti. She enjoys reading fiction, especially novels by Haruki Murakami, Frank Herbert, and Ursula K. Le Guin. She and her fiancé have two cats, Kafka and Mimi, and a dog named Ponyo.