



A. Scriabin: The Complete Piano Sonatas

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The maniacal composer began under Chopin's influence but developed a whole new sound world.

Scriabin composed his ten piano sonatas over a period of two decades - from 1892 thru 1913. Though the early sonatas bear a late romantic style influenced by Chopin, the later ones morph into a unique non-tonal modal form which was his own take on serialism, and which later influenced Messiaen. The narcissistic composer - who eventually came under the spell of concepts of theosophy and other mystics - stretched his musical ideas to the limit in attempting to portray his highly emotional states.

The Third Sonata anticipates the composer's future directions. His second wife was probably the author of the poetic text explaining the course of the sonata. Scriabin's central concept was the unification of the entire universe following a general liberating act of ecstasy. The final outcome of his personal philosophy was a fortunately unrealized gigantic performance in the Himalayas involving thousands of musicians and singers, whose modest goal was to bring about the end of the world.

The Fourth Sonata is shorter than some of the others, and refers musically to themes from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Sonata No. 5 is a single-movement work which eschews major and minor keys and establishes a new tonality. Sonatas 6 thru 10 systemise his unique musical language, which he derived from the "mystical chord" - a stacking of augmented, diminished and perfect fourths. Scriabin felt his music was an objective utterance to the whole world, with himself at the center. The Seventh Sonata is subtitled "White Mass" and the Ninth is the "Black Mass," illustrating the composer's fascination with the diabolical. The complexity of most of the sonatas is overpowering, yet a prophetic impression of even more dense keyboard virtuosity to come later, such as Sorabji. It seems unbelievable that Scriabin had in fact very small hands.

There are many recordings of the sonatas, as a whole set and individually. Russian performers seem to have the edge in capturing the composer's dark colors and daunting virtuosity - although Glenn Gould recorded a very interesting version of No. 5. Some of the finest versions of the 5th, 9th and 10th are by Horowitz, and a now-budget DGG set by Roberto Szidon is of great interest. One of my favorites has been the Harmonia mundi complete set with pianist Robert Taub. The sonics are excellent and they squeezed all sonatas onto only a pair of CDs, whereas many competitors require three CDs.

Russian pianist Stoupeľ, who makes his home in Berlin, studied with Lazar Berman, and is also a conductor. He has mined the sonatas for their expressivity and plays

with great clarity, pounding away with intensity when the music demands it. The recordings were made during a series of broadcasts by the Cologne radio station and recorded by WDR. This is a fine boxed set that deserves consideration for anyone wanting to add a complete set of this unique cycle of sonatas to their collection.

