

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SELECTED
PIANO MUSIC OF FREDERIC CHOPIN AND
ALEXANDER SCRIABIN

Yuhe Wang, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2025

Dissertation directed by: Professor Larissa Dedova, School of Music

This dissertation is grounded in three recitals I completed during my doctoral studies under the guidance of my advisor, Professor Larissa Dedova. Each recital featured works by Frederic Chopin (1810-1849) and Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915). Scriabin, as a devoted follower of Chopin's aesthetic ideals, filled his early and middle-period works with abundant Chopinesque idioms. However, as will be discussed later, even in his juvenile compositions – beneath the surface of apparent imitation – we can discern flashes of his innate genius. These intuitive musical instincts would later evolve into systematic and substantial innovations during his mature period. To gain a more concrete and profound understanding of their works while highlighting the connections and contrasts in their musical language, my professor and I carefully considered the genres and scope of the pieces selected for each program. We aimed to include as many representative works as possible within the one-hour time frame of each recital, while focusing solely on genres explored by both composers to facilitate analysis and comparison.

Both composers excelled in crafting concise, impactful genres such as preludes, nocturnes, etudes, and mazurkas – all of which were included in the performances. Due to my particular fondness for the mazurka, I intentionally curated an entire recital focused on this genre. Beyond their mastery of smaller forms, both composers also demonstrated remarkable command over large-scale works. I have chosen two fantasies and two concertos as my primary subjects to perform and research. To better illustrate the relationship, repertoires are chosen from Scriabin's early to mid-period, as they remain stylistically Romantic and has strong resemblance to Chopin's aesthetic tastes.

Through this dissertation, I hope readers will not only gain a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of each work and appreciate the emotional journey of music students as we learn and perform these pieces, but also uncover the distinct originality beneath the seemingly similar surfaces of Chopin and Scriabin's music. As an art form that is both highly abstract and subjective, music constantly challenges our understanding and appreciation. Moreover, as an art requiring the interaction of three mediums – composer, performer, and audience – there is always the potential for misinterpretation in communication. As performers and listeners, we strive to decipher the composer's intentions and decode the meaning behind every note and notation. In a sense, this process resembles solving a puzzle, one I deeply enjoy. It is my hope to share these insights and reflections through this work.

AN EXPLORATION OF THE SELECTED PIANO MUSIC OF FREDERIC
CHOPIN AND ALEXANDER Scriabin

by

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List of Programs

Recital I

February 29, 2024

5pm

Gildenhorn Recital Hall

Etude in E major, Op. 10, No. 3	F. Chopin
Fantaisie in F minor, Op. 49	F. Chopin
Etude in E major, Op. 8, No. 5	A. Scriabin
Sonata No. 2 in G# minor, Op. 19 (Sonata-Fantasy)	A. Scriabin
I. Andante	
II. Presto	

-Intermission-

Piano Concerto in F# minor, Op. 20	A. Scriabin
I. Allegro	
II. Andante	
III. Allegro moderato	

Accompanied by Athanasios Ramadanidis

Recital II

October 10, 2024

5pm

Gildenhorn Recital Hall

Six Mazurkas of Alexander Scriabin, 1872-1915

Op. 3 No. 4 Moderato

No. 7 Con passione

Op. 25 No. 2 Allegretto

No. 3 Lento

Op. 40 No. 1 Allegro

No. 2 Piacevole

-Intermission-

Twelve Mazurkas of Frederic Chopin, 1810-1849

Quatre Mazurkas, Op. 6

1. F# minor
2. C# minor
3. E major, Vivace
4. Eb minor, Presto, ma non troppo

Cinq Mazurkas, Op. 7

1. Bb major, Vivace
2. A minor, Vivo, ma non troppo
3. F minor
4. Ab major, Presto, ma non troppo
5. C major, Vivo

Trios Mazurkas, Op. 56

1. B major, Allegro non tanto
2. C major, Vivace
3. C minor, Moderato

Recital III

March 26, 2025

5pm

Gildenhorn Recital Hall

Nocturne in Ab major, WoO 3 A. Scriabin

Nocturne in B major, Op. 32, No. 1 F. Chopin

Five Preludes, Op. 16 A. Scriabin

- I. Andante
- II. Allegro
- III. Andante cantabile
- IV. Lento
- V. Allegretto

Prelude in C# minor, Op. 45 F. Chopin

-Intermission-

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21 F. Chopin

- I. Maestoso
- II. Larghetto
- III. Allegro vivace

Accompanied by Athanasios Ramadanidis

Chapter 1: Preludes

Frédéric Chopin's **Prelude in C# minor, Op. 45** (1841) stands as his only independently numbered prelude. Compared to the renowned twenty-four preludes of Op. 28, this work has received far less attention than its artistic merit deserves. Chopin himself described it as a "modulated reverie"¹ – a dreamlike composition whose seemingly restrained exterior conceals profound emotional complexity, earning it recognition as the ballade among preludes.

In terms of formal structure, Chopin employs a free ternary form (ABA'). The opening A section in C# minor establishes its foundation through left-hand arpeggios that undulate in wave-like ascending patterns, introducing the right-hand's sighing melodic line. The B section features extensive modulations oscillating between major and minor keys, characterized by chromatic harmonies and unexpected tonal shifts while maintaining the plaintive right-hand melody. The A' section returns to C# minor, where the thematic reprise is interrupted by a cadenza-like passage built on diminished seventh chord chromaticism. Here, both hands mimic the fluttering of feathers through non-legato articulation, while the harmony intensifies dramatically, shattering the earlier meditative atmosphere before subsiding into calm. The piece concludes with a fading coda, resolving softly on a C# minor chord.

At first glance, the score appears deceptively straightforward. The hands maintain stable, divided roles: undulating eighth-note arpeggios in the left hand accompany the right hand's slow octave melody, creating an illusion of simplicity.

¹ Bernard Gavoty, *Frederic Chopin*, trans. Martin Sokolinsky (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 399.

However, the left hand does more than mere accompanying. It serves as an introduction to the singing melodic line in the right hand, each time evolving from the bass to the middle register. Chopin's genius lies in how he embeds nuanced demands within this seemingly simple framework – singing legato lines, clarity of voice leading, precise control of accompaniment's dynamics and rhythmic stability, delicate pedal shading for transparent textures, and masterful rubato phrasing.

This five-minute miniature epitomizes Chopin's identity as a romantic classicist: infusing improvisational spontaneity within rigorous structures and clear tonal centers. His harmonic language adheres to functional logic but heightens drama through delayed resolutions or unexpected progressions. He prioritizes restraint and balance, maintaining clear stratification between melody and accompaniment, favoring the warm mid-register of the piano, and upholding a classical sense of equilibrium.

Compared to Chopin's 26 preludes, Scriabin showed an even greater affinity for the genre, composing 85 preludes throughout his career. These works trace his evolution from tradition to radical innovation, forming a cornerstone of his piano oeuvre. I have selected **Scriabin's Op.16** – a set of five preludes – as my focus for performance and analysis.

Composed in 1895, these five preludes are stylistically diverse yet interconnected. We notice immediately that each piece employs distinct textural frameworks while maintaining tonal connectivity. The first prelude in B major (marked *Andante*) loosely follows ternary form (ABA') with a coda. Its left hand executes broken-chord arpeggios in triplets within the bass register, though the thumb

intermittently fragments melodic elements to destabilize harmonic clarity. The right hand introduces a monophonic theme in mid-high registers, later enriched through melodic echoes and parallel sixths during development. The climax arrives in the latter A' section: the left hand's triplets generate sonic resonance around tonic B while the right hand's single notes leap across octaves, dynamically intensifying with expanding intervals before subsiding. Both hands ultimately converge in the bass register, resolving to a *pianississimo* low B.

While employing wide-spanning left-hand arpeggios like Chopin, Scriabin differentiates himself through two primary means. First, his use of triplet rhythms introduces instability, creating rhythmic counterpoint against the right hand's eighth-note melody. Secondly, harmonically, he extensively employs non-chord tones to obscure functional stability, keeping harmonies teetering on tonal edges. Combined with dense, murky pedal effects, Scriabin cultivates a pervasive sense of ambiguity. Even in this two-minute prelude, Scriabin's aesthetic duality emerges: a restless contradiction between Romantic lyricism and a subversive impulse. He crafts exquisite melodies and lush harmonies yet disrupts their poetic beauty with undercurrents of tension, tragedy, and a desire to dismantle Chopin's aristocratic melancholy. The result is music that simmers with inner conflict, where tenderness coexists with volatility, leaving listeners unsettled even in moments of resolution.

Turning to the remaining preludes in Op. 16, the set's tonal connections are striking: B major (No.1), G# minor (No.2), Gb major (No.3), Eb minor (No.4), and F# major (No.5). Beyond conventional major-minor pairings, this demonstrates Scriabin's penchant for remote keys – a characteristic persisting throughout his

oeuvre. Compared to the first prelude, No.2 (*Allegro*) maintains traditional harmonic progressions but emphasizes rhythmic displacement: left-hand sixteenth notes against right-hand quintuplets, compounded by syncopated accents. This 38-bar miniature exhaustively employs dynamic extremes from *pianississimo* to *fortississimo*, achieving neurotic intensity through abrupt dynamic shifts – a stark contrast to Chopin's restrained emotional palette.

No.3 in G \flat major (*Andante cantabile*) emerges as the set's most beautiful and Chopinesque piece. Maintaining free ternary form, its opening sixths played by both hands later transform into a stable left-hand accompaniment. The vocal right-hand melody incorporates Scriabin's signature triplets and syncopations, concluding phrases with brief choral-style cadences. Both melodic ornamentation and harmonic warmth recall Chopin's elegance.

Nos.4-5, though brief (each under a minute), match their predecessors in emotional intensity. The 12-bar No.4 (*Lento*) features a continuous right-hand melody supported by left-hand octave harmonies. Scriabin animates this single-line structure through rhythmic variety (quarter notes, eighths, dotted triplets) and non-functional harmonic coloration. Dynamic shifts from *pianississimo* to *mezzo forte*, creating unresolved tension. No.5 (*Allegretto*) adopts rondo form as the set's most classically balanced piece. Its 3/8 meter and buoyant melody evoke Chopin's dances, yet the repetitive motifs and lightweight articulation create an ephemeral conclusion – like grasping at smoke, leaving only elusive impressions.

From a performance perspective, Scriabin's works permit greater interpretive freedom than Chopin's. Firstly, his pursuit of extreme sonorities aligns with modern

piano capabilities, featuring experimental pedaling techniques anticipating Impressionism (notably contemporaneous with Debussy's early works). Additionally, his volatile emotions, rhythmic instability, and harmonic ambiguity invite bold rubato, even to the point of distorting meter for dramatic effect. For performers, this demands not only technical precision but a willingness to embrace chaos, transforming each interpretation into a visceral dialogue with Scriabin's mercurial genius.

Chapter 2: Nocturnes

Among Chopin's 19 nocturnes, the **Nocturne in B major, Op. 32, No. 1** is not the most renowned, yet I argue that this B major nocturne, composed at a time when the genre was not yet central to Chopin's output and his genius remained in its formative stages, possesses unique qualities that merit closer attention.

Published in Paris in 1837 and dedicated to Baroness de Billing, this nocturne was likely composed years earlier. From his student days, Chopin had been drawn to the nocturne – a genre pioneered by the Irish composer John Field – and quickly transformed its somewhat mannered conventions into a vessel for his own experimentation. As Marmontel described Field's nocturnes:

“He was the inventor of short, characteristic pieces, kinds of reveries, meditations, in which the expression of a tender sentiment, sometimes a little mannered, is most often accompanied by a rippling bass in arpeggios or in

broken chords, harmonious cradle rockings that support the melodic phrase and animate it with sudden modulations but rarely maintain a dialogue with it.”²

Applying this framework to Chopin’s nocturne reveals striking parallels. Marked *Andante sostenuto*, the piece unfolds with serene elegance. The left hand maintains a steady eighth-note broken-chord accompaniment in B major, while the right hand spins a compact melody structured in 2+2+4 phrases. Chopin’s ornamentation here is restrained, avoiding virtuosic vocal flourishes. Harmonically, the work adheres to convention: the opening B major theme transitions through secondary keys (D#, A#, G# minor) before returning to the tonic. A second iteration introduces subtle rhythmic variations and embellishments, culminating in a dominant F# major chord.

At this point, everything remains tranquil and harmonically predictable – until we reach the coda. In measure 62, a jarring E# diminished seventh chord emerges, seemingly poised to resolve to F# major. Chopin intensifies the dissonance through cascading ornaments and a prolonged appoggiatura on D in the penultimate measure, creating an illusion of modulation to D major. Yet, in a masterstroke of subversion, he abruptly reintroduces the tonic B – not as a major chord, but as B minor (B-D-F#). This unexpected resolution inverts the Picardy Third convention (traditionally a minor-key piece ending on a major tonic), leaving listeners disoriented and the nocturne’s serene facade irrevocably fractured. This audacious twist subverts the nocturne’s clichéd dreaminess, showcasing Chopin’s ability to evoke dramatic shifts

² Bernard Gavoty, *Frederic Chopin*, trans. Martin Sokolinsky (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 407.

through functional harmony alone. As discussed in the prelude chapter, his genius lies not in overt innovation but in restraint – transforming convention through balance and emotional precision.

In contrast, Scriabin's contributions to the Nocturne genre are limited, totaling just five works. These include WoO 3 (the focus of this analysis), two nocturnes from Op. 5, the Nocturne for the Left Hand, Op. 9, No. 2, and the late Poème-Nocturne, Op. 61. If the final piece is categorized under its primary genre designation as a *poème* rather than a nocturne, Scriabin's output in this form narrows to four nocturnes, all composed during his early years.

The work discussed here – WoO 3, **Nocturne in Ab major** – was written in 1886, when Scriabin was merely 14 years old. While this piece bears the unmistakable imprint of Chopinesque lyricism (offering little hint of Scriabin's later stylistic radicalism), it already reveals his budding fascination with the piano's extreme registers and dense textural clusters. The adolescent composer's inclination to exploit the instrument's full sonic spectrum – from rumbling bass depths to glittering treble heights – foreshadows the orchestral grandeur that would define his mature works. Though structurally conventional, this nocturne serves as a cryptic prelude to the audacious innovations yet to come.

Lacking tempo or expression markings, the work adheres to strict ternary form (ABA'). It opens with two Cs in the right hand – one strong, one weak – creating vocal stratification over barcarolle-like arpeggiated accompaniment. The 6/8 meter, beyond facilitating this waterborne rhythm, foreshadows Scriabin's lifelong preference for triple-based meters (pervasive 3/4, later manifesting in 9/8, 12/8). The

melody unfolds in conventional 4+4 phrases through steady eighth notes, adorned not with Chopinesque coloratura but through parallel thirds and sixths. The A' section faithfully restates the theme without harmonic deviation, confirming the work's traditional harmonic framework.

The B section erupts in stark contrast: a jarring shift to C major via key signature change, with both hands cascading in sixteenth-note harmonies. The melody survives only as skeletal top notes while the left hand thickens into dark, chromaticized bass regions. Dynamic extremes (*p-f*) clash per measure, creating abrupt dramatic surges. The transition back to A section proves most revelatory – four bars of 3/4 choral-style writing over Ab major, where triplets against quarter notes achieve Scriabin's characteristic "pleading" effect, violently pacifying preceding turmoil.

Despite its Chopinesque surface, this nocturne foreshadows Scriabin's mature aesthetic. His penchant for extreme registral spans (melodies vaulting to the piano's upper limits while the bass plunges into darkness) and dramatic textural shifts (from translucent arpeggios to orchestral density) already challenge the genre's introspective norms. Even his pedal markings – aimed at clarity within murkiness – hint at a desire to transcend the piano's lyrical potential, anticipating his later quest to transform the instrument into a cosmic resonance.

In this early work, Scriabin's duality emerges: a romantic's ear for melody coexists with an almost neurotic impulse to disrupt. While Chopin's nocturnes balance emotion with classical restraint, Scriabin's – even in adolescence – betrays a restlessness that would soon explode into uncharted sonic realms.

Chapter 3: Etudes

The piano etudes of Chopin and Scriabin represent dual pinnacles in the fusion of technique and artistry within Romantic music. Through distinct aesthetic paths, both composers elevated the etude – a genre traditionally focused on technical training – into autonomous artworks embodying profound emotions and zeitgeist. Particularly emblematic are Chopin's Etude Op.10, No.3 and Scriabin's Etude Op.8, No.5, which not only epitomize their creators' personal styles but also mirror the seismic shifts in musical language from the 19th to early 20th centuries.

Chopin's 27 etudes emerged during the 1830s when Romantic music flourished. These works completely revolutionized the paradigm of Czerny-style mechanical etudes by integrating technical challenges like arpeggios, double notes, and octaves with poetic narratives, thus pioneering the genre of "concert etudes." Their core aesthetic lies in "the piano as a singing voice" - melodic cantabile and nuanced tonal layers became the ultimate goal of technical training.

The **Etude in E major, Op. 10, No. 3**, renowned for its profoundly lyrical melody, is often nicknamed "*Tristesse*" (sadness), though this title was added posthumously to reflect its emotional atmosphere. Distinct from Chopin's more technically demanding etudes (such as the arpeggios of Op. 10 No. 1 or the rapid scales of No. 4), this etude centers on a song-like melody, embodying Chopin's unique "operatic" piano writing style. Influenced by Italian *bel canto* master Vincenzo Bellini, its fluid melodic lines breathe like vocal extensions on the keyboard. Simultaneously, Chopin's bold chromatic harmonies and rich tonal colors balance Romantic passion with refined classical structure.

This E major etude employs Chopin's characteristic ternary form (ABA'). The opening presents a long, melancholic melody in the right hand, accompanied by broken harmonies played by the thumb and index finger beneath – establishing polyphonic complexity from the outset. Chopin demands performers to emphasize the melody (played by fingers 3-4-5) while controlling the thumb and index finger's volume as harmonic support. The left hand maintains its own polyphony: bass quarter notes synchronized with syncopated thumb notes create a whispering accompaniment. Here Chopin demonstrates supreme legato control, weaving melodies like unbroken silk threads whose undulations captivate listeners.

Following the relatively calm A section, an impassioned middle section emerges at measure 22 with increased tempo and dynamics. The texture intensifies through right-hand sixths and thirds, left-hand wide leaps, and mirroring double notes from measure 32 onward. Musical tension escalates through dynamic shifts, denser note clusters, and expanding intervals from thirds to octaves. The dramatic climax at measure 46 resolves through an eight-measure cadenza before returning to the theme via dominant harmony. The coda echoes the opening pattern with fragmented phrases, concluding with contemplative resolution.

Standing out among Chopin's etudes for its lyricism, this work embodies refined emotional expression and tender musical language. Through meticulous melodic crafting and harmonic ingenuity, Chopin realizes the Romantic ideal of conveying complex emotions. While technically demanding – requiring cantabile right-hand phrasing amidst polyphonic layers, stable left-hand accompaniment, and daunting virtuosic passages in the middle section – its true allure lies in expressive

depth. More than an etude, it epitomizes Chopin's perfect fusion of technical mastery and emotional profundity. His classical aesthetic of sorrow without despair, where technique serves restrained emotional expression, finds perfect manifestation here.

Throughout his career, Scriabin composed 26 etudes, including Op. 2, No.1, twelve in Op. 8, eight in Op. 42, Op. 49, No.1, Op. 56, No.4, and three in his late-period Op. 65. Like his piano sonatas, these etude collections demonstrate an extraordinary range of emotional and technical demands. Among these 26 etudes, I have selected **Etude Op. 8, No. 5** – also in E major – for study and performance alongside Chopin's works.

The Op. 8 etudes serve as Scriabin's early manifesto of pianistic and compositional prowess, composed in 1895 in Moscow. Their striking emotional depth and technical sophistication belie their low opus number. While Chopin and Liszt's influence remains palpable – Scriabin absorbed their approach of elevating musical substance above mere technical display – these etudes undeniably aim to captivate the ear rather than merely train the fingers. Their universal appeal has led to numerous transcriptions for diverse instrumental combinations.

Though rooted in Chopinesque tradition, Etude Op. 8 No. 5 reveals Scriabin's emerging individuality. This E major gem stands as the most enchanting of the set. Structured in ternary form (ABA') and marked *Briosso*, its compound melody features octave leaps in the right hand and the piece has a wistful sense of nostalgia. The vocal-inspired melody begins on the E major tonic, weaving stepwise motion with leaps to create lyrical continuity and organic tension. Harmonic progressions enriched

by secondary dominants, suspensions, and parallel sixths/third intervals radiate warmth and luminosity.

The middle section plunges into *C#* minor, where the left hand's march-like dotted-rhythm gradually tightens into urgency. Ascending right-hand octave chords grow increasingly agitated, while left-hand chromatic octaves inject restless yearning. Dramatic harmonies – enhanced sevenths, dissonant modulations, and chains of fifths/augmented fourths/diminished sevenths – create a world of harmonic ambiguity and emotional turbulence. Dynamics swell from *p* to *ff*, culminating in a liberating climax.

After this wave of emotional turbulence, the music returns to the opening theme. The right hand reintroduces the melody with a triplet rhythm, adding a light and dynamic feel to the music. The harmonic color also becomes fuller, using extended chords such as the six-four chord and the ninth chord, along with harmonic progressions that blur tonality, giving the melody a dreamy quality while elevating the emotional depth. In the coda, the melody gradually fades into the high register, as if the soul is ascending into an infinite space. The harmonic treatment skillfully employs suspensions and gentle arpeggiated textures, allowing the music to quietly dissipate in an unfinished reverie, as if leading the listener into a world filled with dreams and brilliance.

Here Scriabin manifests his philosophy of melody as the expression of the soul. Lyrical yet exploratory melodic lines, adorned with rubato flexibility and micro-rhythmic nuances, transcend mere technical display. His harmonic language – featuring extended tertian chords, non-functional progressions, and tonal ambiguity –

anticipates his later mystical quest for transcending reality through spiritual elevation. This work marks the embryonic stage of a musical philosophy that would culminate in Scriabin's unique sonic cosmology.

Chapter 4: Mazurkas

Chopin's Mazurkas

Among Chopin's complete oeuvre, the mazurkas occupy a privileged position. While they may only occasionally express the heroic grandeur and anguished sentiments fully manifested in his sonatas, scherzos, ballades and polonaises, from a purely musical standpoint they represent perhaps the most exquisite, personal, and brilliantly original compositions Chopin ever created. This triple-meter dance form rooted in Polish rural tradition – with its characteristic accentuation of weak beats – became in Chopin's hands a vessel for both personal emotion and national identity. The fifty-seven mazurkas he composed throughout his life progressively demonstrate his mastery of melody, harmony, and form.

Chopin's mazurkas are deeply embedded in Poland's cultural heritage, synthesizing various folk-dance forms: the oberek (frenzied, fast-paced, exuberant), kujawiak (gentle, songlike), and the mazur proper. Unlike the waltz, which dominated European salons, the mazurka retained a rustic, earthy quality, often accompanied by bagpipes or fiddles in village settings. Chopin reimagined this dance, preserving its rhythmic lilt – typically with accents on the second or third beat – while infusing it

with his own rhythmic variety. His melodic language is lyrical and ornamented, often adorned with grace notes, trills, and chromatic inflections that echo the vocal traditions of Polish folk song. Harmonically, he ventured beyond convention, using unexpected modulations, modal mixtures, and drone effects to evoke both nostalgia and modernity. This fusion of folk simplicity and Romantic sophistication distinguishes Chopin's mazurkas as a groundbreaking contribution to the piano repertoire.

The Op. 6 set, composed in 1830, has four pieces capturing the young composer's voice as he bridges Warsaw's folk heritage with his emerging style. The No.1 in F# minor is tender yet restless, its lyrical melody swaying over a subtly shifting rhythm, conjuring a solitary dancer lost in memory. The gentle sway of the rhythm, characteristic of the kujawiak, evokes an intimate conversation, perhaps recalling scenes from Chopin's homeland. The middle section, marked by unexpected chromatic turns, adds a sense of yearning, before the opening theme returns, fading away like a sigh.

In contrast, No. 2 in C# minor sparkles with playfulness, its drone-like fifths mimicking a bagpipe as the melody dances with chromatic flair – a village twilight scene alive with muted joy. The main theme, filled with syncopated accents and chromatic tension, suggests a sense of unease or longing. As the music progresses, moments of lyricism emerge, only to be swept away by the relentless pulse of the dance.

No. 3 in E major bursts with exuberance, its bold accents evoking a festive stomp. The ornamented melody lilts gracefully above a steady rhythmic foundation,

while the harmonic shifts add unexpected charm and playfulness. The improvisatory quality of the piece gives the impression of a spontaneous folk dance. No. 4 in E \flat minor drifts into enigma, its sparse texture painting a misty, elusive figure. Marked by its subdued dynamics and expressive rubato, this mazurka exudes a feeling of resignation. The harmonies, shifting between darkness and light, leave a lingering impression of unresolved longing. These pieces showcase Chopin's early creativity, balancing rustic vigor with delicate introspection.

Following closely, Op. 7 (1832) presents five mazurkas that explore a richer spectrum of colors. The first in B \flat major pulsates with the bustle of a marketplace, its dotted rhythms and playful call-and-response evoking the vivacious Oberek dance. As the most celebrated piece of the set, its charm lies in its rhythmic vitality. Structured in rondo form (A-B-A-C-A), the recurring main theme amplifies the dance-like buoyancy. Harmonically, it opens with bold ascending tenths that inject exuberance, while the second theme transitions to F major for elegant contrast, and the third theme weaves ambiguous harmonies to conjure an air of mystery. The melodies are sprightly and adorned with florid ornamentation; the second theme flows with lyrical grace, and the third unfolds delicately, showcasing Chopin's multifaceted melodic genius. Emotionally, the piece balances vivacity and refinement, capturing the joy of rural festivities, with the third theme adding a touch of enigmatic depth.

The second mazurka in A minor turns inward, adopting a rondo form that feels compact and intimate. Rooted in A minor, its harmonies are tinged with chromatic passing notes that heighten a melancholic aura. The melody, tender and

songlike, is embroidered with delicate ornaments, exuding a wistful nostalgia. The emotional core is intimate yet bittersweet, radiating quiet longing. A sudden shift to the relative A major in the middle section introduces a theme brimming with dotted rhythms and triplets, its leaping double notes shattering the introspective mood. After the central episode, the opening elegiac melody returns, now intensified by chromatic twists and unexpected harmonies, suspending the listener in silent contemplation.

The third mazurka in F minor, also in rondo form, unfolds as a passionate dance amidst stormy contrasts. Syncopations and dynamic extremes create tension through chiaroscuro (bright/dark) effects, while bold harmonic progressions amplify the dramatic urgency. Next mazurka in A \flat major, structured in ternary form, glides like an aristocratic court dance. Its fleeting, ornamented melodies and subtle rhythmic sway suggest carefree playfulness, while the middle section's improvisatory flourishes add rustic spontaneity. The A section races with vitality, the B section briefly slows into introspection, and the return to A restores exuberance.

Harmonically, the bright A \flat major is animated by swift tonal shifts, with the B section offering a fleeting moment of reflection. The finale closes with whimsical humor, its open fifths and abrupt cadences mimicking a playful pirouette. Here, Chopin's melodies still sing with folk charm, yet the harmonies – laced with chromatic inflections – reveal his growing artistic sophistication.

By the time of Op. 56 (1843), Chopin's mazurkas had reached a zenith of complexity and profundity, their structures more experimental and their emotional language deepened. The first in B major radiates noble warmth, its contrapuntal textures showcasing mastery. Structured in a five-part rondo, its harmonic daring is

evident in modulations to E \flat major and G major, creating stark contrasts. The opening theme unfolds like a dialogue, gradually intensifying; the B section turns inward with introspection, while the C section surges with dramatic complexity. Emotionally, it progresses from tentative beginnings to fervent climaxes, mirroring an inner journey of growth.

The second mazurka in C major diverges from its predecessors with rustic vigor. Its driving rhythms and open intervals evoke village festivities and boisterous crowds, yet its surface simplicity belies harmonic sophistication. The third mazurka in C minor, one of the longest in the genre, stands apart as a meditation of crystalline gravity. Its meticulous counterpoint and audacious modifications paint a portrait of solitary confrontation with inner turmoil. Chopin masterfully interweaves lyrical reverie and dance-like energy, transcending traditional mazurka form. The harmonic explorations in this set propel the genre into new dimensions, fusing folk roots with the grand narratives of Romanticism.

Chopin's mazurkas transcend their dance origins, becoming miniature tone poems that capture the soul of Poland and the heart of their creator. His innovation lies in this alchemy: he took a regional tradition and imbued it with a universal voice, crafting music that dances between joy and sorrow, simplicity and complexity. Through his melodic grace and harmonic daring, Chopin not only preserved the mazurka but redefined it, leaving a legacy that resonates far beyond the Polish countryside.

Scriabin's Mazurkas

The mazurka found a new voice in the works of Alexander Scriabin, who wrote twenty-three mazurkas (two were published posthumously) in all reflect both his admiration towards Chopin and his restless evolution. Ten are in Op. 3, nine in Op. 25, and two in Op. 40. While Chopin transformed the mazurka into a vehicle for poetic expression and national identity, Scriabin inherited this legacy and reshaped it through his own evolving musical language.

Scriabin's Op. 3, composed between 1887 and 1890, are often considered derivative, but they demonstrate his keen assimilation of the genre's stylistic nuances, especially its harmonic quirkiness and sense of adventure.³ No.4 in E major shows long flowing lines with tender warmth. Its lyrical melody and gentle rhythm evoking a peaceful countryside dance under a golden sunset. This sense of unraveling melodic line is a common element among the melodically driven pieces. Subtle chromatic touches in the harmony hint at Scriabin's individuality, though the piece remains structurally conventional. No. 7 in E minor turns inward, its plaintive, fragmented melody and restless accompaniment painting a solitary figure in a twilight forest. These works mirror Chopin's emotional range, yet introduce a slightly more unsettled energy, a foreshadowing of Scriabin's later restlessness.

By Op. 25 in 1899, Scriabin's voice had matured, blending Chopin's influence with bolder harmonic exploration. No. 2 in C major sparkles with whimsical charm, its dotted rhythms and syncopations recalling a mazurka's rustic flair, while

³ Lincoln Ballard, "The Solo Piano Music," in *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 52.

unexpected modulations and a wistful A minor middle section conjure a village celebration tinged with nostalgia. As showed evidently in his preludes, the triples dominate this opus number. Almost the entire piece is composed in triplet rhythm, with minor switch to duple division. Also evident is the polyrhythmic writing in the left-hand accompaniment. No. 3 in E minor is written in form ABAB, with coda. The primary theme, tentative and mournful, is characteristic of the kujawiak and reminiscent of Chopin's melancholy melodies. Its mournful melody moves mostly in whole and half-steps, with the raised fourth and seventh notes of the E minor scale suggesting the Gypsy minor mode.⁴ Here, Scriabin's harmonic complexity and textural richness surpass Chopin's more restrained chromaticism, signaling his growing independence, though the repetition of the thematic material and the shape of the undulating melodic line are in the unmistakable style of Chopin.

Op. 40, from 1903, captures Scriabin at a crossroads, poised between his Chopin-inspired roots and his mystical future. No. 1 in D \flat major drifts with dreamy elegance, its trilled melody and fluid, impressionistic harmonies creating a moonlit ballroom trance – a stark contrast to Chopin's grounded lyricism. No. 2 in F \sharp major is playful yet elusive, its rapid runs and abrupt ending evoking a sprite in a shimmering forest. These pieces stretch the mazurka's boundaries, with remote key signatures and harmonies that blur tonality and rhythms that loosen the dance's traditional pulse, marking Scriabin's leap toward a new soundworld.

⁴ Carol Kendall Oliver, "The Mazurka Triangle: The Influence of the Mazurkas of Frédéric Chopin on the Mazurkas of Alexander Scriabin and Reinhold Glière" (PhD diss., University of Memphis, 2005), 87, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Comparing Scriabin to Chopin reveals both kinship and divergence. Like Chopin, Scriabin preserves the mazurka's triple-meter essence and emotional breadth. Both composers root their mazurkas in folk tradition – Chopin through Polish dance, Scriabin through a more generalized Romantic nostalgia – infusing it with personal expression. However, Scriabin's inheritance evolves distinctly. Chopin's melodies, adorned for folk flavor, contrast with Scriabin's, which turn decadent and ethereal. Harmonically, Chopin's innovations – chromaticism and modal shifts – remain tonal, while Scriabin's push toward ambiguity anticipates atonality. Structurally, Chopin's concise, dance-derived forms differ from Scriabin's freer, fragmented designs in his later works. From a more intuitive viewpoint, two composers notate their music drastically different. Chopin's score is filled with musical notations (fingerings, pedal marks, dynamics marks, rubato and tempo changes) and articulation marks (accents, sforzandos, legato slurs), while Scriabin, though often times providing detailed articulation and expressions marks, never show his solution on fingerings or pedal marks. It is believed that performers who are to learn Scriabin's work can make their own decisions on this aspect properly and effectively. As a performer myself, it often feels liberating to play Scriabin's music, the lack of instruction leave room for reinvention.

Scriabin's mazurkas begin as a tribute to Chopin, adopting his rhythmic vitality and lyrical depth, but grow into a unique voice. His early pieces reflect Chopin's balance of charm and melancholy, while Op. 40 transcends the dance's origins, embracing a mystical, forward-looking aesthetic. This trajectory underscores Scriabin's genius: he inherited Chopin's mazurka as a poetic form and expanded it

into a bridge between Romanticism and the 20th century, honoring his predecessor while forging his own path.

Chapter 5: Fantasies

The works we have discussed so far can only provide a glimpse into the composer's thoughts on a smaller scale. Due to their limited scope, they are unable to fully showcase the composer's complete talents. The two fantasias mentioned next are the second largest scale works in my research project. These pieces were created during the composers' periods of stylistic maturity, and in terms of structure, thematic development, and harmonic design, they offer a more comprehensive display of their compositional skills and personal style.

Chopin's Fantaisie, Op. 49

Chopin's Fantaisie in F minor, Op.49, stands as one of his longest single movement works and a crowning achievement of his artistic prime. Though titled Fantaisie, it weaves an epic spiritual journey through astonishing structural logic and white-hot emotional intensity. Blending sonata-form drama, variational fluidity, and improvisatory poetry, it remains an unsurpassed monument in Romantic piano literature.

The work opens with a *Tempo di marcia* introduction: not a funereal march but solemn, distant, and muted, then proceeds to a more assertive motive uttered with the sound of a trumpet playing softly. As the F minor main theme erupts, triplet-

driven chromatic torrents and stormy harmonic progressions engulf listeners in emotional chaos. Here, the improvisatory nature of the fantasy shows: Chopin swiftly moves from one state of mind to another using a transitional episode. He soon gets to the life of the subject with a theme of a somber color and its development toward a seductive, exalted phrase: light wins out over darkness. The right-hand purity soaring over organ-like left-hand harmonies – only to be shattered by the theme's violent return. Polyphonic textures and mirror counterpoint depict spiritual torment, the recapitulation compressing themes with barbed ornamentation through F minor and A \flat major struggles. With once returning to the music of the introduction, Chopin extemporizes on the other themes and ends with a meditative, collected, peaceful, and rather short *lento sostenuto*. This is a transposed reprise of the first episode after the introduction, a fan of modulations the suddenly snaps closed on a plagal cadence. The miraculous coda breaks into A \flat major: bell-like chords proclaim victory while a 10-measure dominant pedal, thickened with ninth and thirteenth tensions, culminates in cathartic resolution – a spiritual rebirth from darkness to light.

Here Chopin conducts radical harmonic experiments. Chromatic descents (B \flat -A-A \flat) blur tonality; abrupt modulations (G \flat to B) and enharmonic changes rupture classical logic. Diminished sevenths and Neapolitan harmonies create razor-edged tension. Rhythmic drama progresses from collective struggle (march rhythms) to individual anguish (syncopations and 3:2 cross-rhythms). Rubato breathes life into melodies, particularly in the chorale's prayer-like hesitations.

Pianistic demands reach extremes: octave thunderbolts in contrary motions evoke passion struggle, while the double-note melody accompanied by fast

arpeggiated broken harmony depict a heartbeat-skipping feeling of bittersweet or longing. The performer must balance steel-fingered precision in turbulent passages with feather-light caresses in *lento sostenuto* episodes, using pedal resonance to create veiled whispers. Dynamic extremes from *ppp* to *ff* require an alchemic touch – transmuting personal anguish into artistic permanence.

Contextualized within Chopin's 1841 Parisian exile – plagued by illness and Polish political despair – the Fantaisie becomes multilayered metaphor: march rhythms symbolize national trauma, the chorale embodies spiritual resilience, while the A \flat apotheosis envisions freedom. This work shattered 19th-century formal conventions, inspiring generations. Its improvisatory genius forging greater architecture than sonata form. Its legacy echoes through Liszt's B minor Sonata (single-movement narrative ambition), Brahms' Paganini Variations (contrapuntal profundity), and Scriabin harmonic adventures. In fourteen minutes, Chopin's fantasy crucible fuses personal and historical trauma into an immortal monument. As the final A \flat major chord fades, listeners might discern dual echoes: Warsaw insurgents' battle cries, and an artist's solitary keystrokes in the Parisian night.

Scriabin's Sonata-Fantasy, Op.19

Alexander Scriabin's ten piano sonatas stand as milestones tracing the evolution of his compositional style. An exceptional pianist himself, Scriabin's unique performing traits – nervous excitement, flexible nuance, subtle rhythmic inflections, and refined tonal shadings – found direct expression in his works. His first three sonatas, composed during the 1890s, emerged from his artistic maturation period

when his music exhibited strong Romantic tendencies aligned with the traditions of Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt.

My analytical focus centers on the Sonata No. 2 in G# minor, Op. 19 (Sonata-Fantasy). Initially sketched in 1892 and premiered at Paris' Salle Érard in 1896, this two-movement work underwent revisions before its 1897 publication by Belyayev. The sonata unfolds through a binary slow-fast design, mirroring Scriabin's unpublished G# minor Fantasy-Sonata in 1886. Notably, its movements were composed inversely: the *Presto* finale emerged first in 1892, followed by the *Andante* introduction four years later before their 1897 unification.

Bearing the subtitle "Sonata-Fantasy" in homage to Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata Op. 27, No. 2, Scriabin's work shares structural kinship with Beethoven's two-movement sonatas Opp. 90 and 111. Moreover, this rare dedication to his first love Natalya Sekerina remains among his few inscribed compositions.⁵

The composer described Op.19 as embodying "an image of the wide, turbulent expanse of the sea,"⁶ a Romantic metaphor for the human psyche specifically inspired by the Black Sea vistas witnessed during his 1897 Crimean honeymoon with Vera Ivanovna Isakovich. The music transcends literal pictorialism, instead conveying Romantic sensibility through perpetual metamorphosis. The *Andante* movement paints impressions of turbid oceanic depths and caressing moonlight. G# minor harmonies diffuse across the keyboard like mist, weaving a resonant haze through sustained pedaling. Melodic lines flow in irregular respiratory rhythms (notably the

⁵ Lincoln Ballard, "The Solo Piano Music," in *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 39.

⁶ Ye. Rudakova and A. I. Kandinsky, *Scriabin: His Life and Times*, trans. Tatyana Chistyakova (Neptune City, NJ: Paganiniana Publications, Inc., 1984), 69.

opening 3+7 bar asymmetric phrase), dissolving classical sonata squareness. A motivic cell combining quarter-note chords with triplet calls, enhanced by initial bass grace notes, echoes into the distance. These triplets, already prominent in Scriabin's earlier preludes and etudes, dominate the movement's rhythmic vocabulary.

The B major second theme fractures into motivic shards, its 3:2 polyrhythm against left-hand triplets embodying intellect-intuition conflict. Subsequent development intensifies this rhythmic complexity, destabilizing lyrical melodies through persistent cross-rhythms. The recapitulation's stormy climax employs octave triplets in the right hand against chromatic left-hand ostinatos, sonically depicting maritime fury and human vulnerability. A compressed reprise of opening material in E major concludes the movement in glittering lunar radiance. Interpretively, this introductory movement poses challenges through its languid tempo and contrapuntal interplay between hands. Pianists must navigate its textural swampland while maintaining melodic integrity amidst rhythmic complexity and harmonic density.

The *Presto* finale unleashes "the boundless, storm-whipped sea" through relentless agitation. Its superficially conventional ternary form belies extraordinary musical substance. G# minor octaves slash like lightning as left-hand chromatic anvils hammer against right-hand triplet machinery evoking hurricane forces. The central Eb minor episode inverts texture: singing melodies in the right-hand surge through left-hand arpeggiated waves, modulating unpredictably before the theme's recapitulation. The coda achieves brutal beauty through motivic high-register filigree and five-octave left-hand sweeps, culminating in a sudden G# minor *fortissimo*.

Every cell of this work pulses with genetic duality. Its harmonic language straddles Romanticism and modernism – augmented triads and diminished sevenths create prismatic color vortices. Rhythmic structures merge salon refinement with industrial violence: the liquid temporal layers of triplets against rubato melodies evolve into machine-like polyrhythms. The coda's seven-octave chromatic sweeps transmute the piano from parlor instrument into cosmic organ.

This concise yet monumental work, among Scriabin's personal favorites, encapsulates his transition from Romantic twilight to mystic dawn. Its "Sonata-Fantasy" subtitle reveals dual allegiances – nostalgic homage to Chopin's poeticism and bold leap towards 20th-century harmonic revolution. Like a volcano confined by classical forms, it erupts through structural fissures with transformative energy, foreshadowing modernism's tectonic shifts in musical language.

Chapter 6: Concertos

Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 21

Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21, was composed between 1829 and 1830, predating his Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 11 in compositional order. At age 19 while studying at the Warsaw Conservatory, the work premiered at Warsaw's National Theater on March 17, 1830, with the composer as soloist.⁷

⁷ Bernard Gavoty, *Frederic Chopin*, trans. Martin Sokolinsky (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 81.

Though Chopin modestly noted in his correspondence that "the orchestral part may appear clumsy," the concerto already reveals his revolutionary approach to pianistic language and transformative treatment of classical concerto form.

The creative impetus stemmed from Chopin's unrequited passion for soprano Konstancja Gladkowska. In an 1829 letter to a friend, he acknowledged this inspiration, later confiding in notes before leaving Poland in 1830: "The Larghetto of this concerto is my silent confession to her."⁸ Chopin expanded cadenzas improvisatorially during performance – a practice he maintained throughout his concert career. While employing double woodwinds per the original manuscript, Chopin's orchestration remains conservative, with strings often sustaining chordal foundations and woodwinds echoing thematic material. This calculated subordination of the orchestra elevates the piano's narrative dominance, essentially transforming a symphonic structure into an expanded piano score.

In the opening *Maestoso*, Chopin subverts classical sonata-allegro convention through dual expositions. The orchestral introduction presents fragmented F minor motifs – fateful knocks in strings and shadowy woodwind interweaving – while reserving the complete principal theme for the piano's delayed entrance (m.71). The piano's cascading arpeggios evoke youthful vulnerability: the melody's restrained agitation in the bass clef contrasts with decorative upper-register palpitations. Built on sighing descending seconds (notably m.74 in the piano part), the theme undergoes motivic metamorphosis through sequences and inversions. The luminous A \flat major

⁸ Bernard Gavoty, *Frederic Chopin*, trans. Martin Sokolinsky (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 75.

secondary theme (m.125) emerges as sacred incantation, with right-hand sixths mimicking vocal portamenti over "bell-like" left-hand arpeggios emphasizing dominant pedals. The development section (m.225) plunges into chromatic turbulence via diminished seventh progressions and enharmonic shifts, culminating in a C minor episode (m.257) where orchestral-piano dialogues manifest psychological turmoil through abrupt dynamic contrasts and choked silences. Here, Chopin breathes Romantic vitality into classical form, positioning the piano not merely as soloist but as dramatic protagonist.

The $A\flat$ major *Larghetto* – later dubbed "sigh under moonlight" – constitutes the work's spiritual core. Departing from traditional concerto slow movements, this nocturne-like movement unfolds as intimate confession. The A section's monodic piano theme (mm.7-12) floats over "liquid bass" accompaniment – $A\flat$ pedal tones underpinning chromatic inner thirds. B section ($A\flat$ minor, m.42) introduces agitated string syncopations answered by pianistic filigree, culminating in a central episode where orchestral tremolos and improvisatory piano runs depict emotional upheaval. The modified reprise (A', m.75) dissolves into ethereal textures: pizzicato "starlight" strings and evaporating piano ascents leave only whispered resonance. This movement transcends formal convention, crystallizing unspoken longing into timeless poetry.

The *Allegro vivace* finale harnesses mazurka rhythms – elastic accents (e.g., second-beat left-hand stresses in m.2) and dotted and triplet rhythmic interplay. Chopin designed a rondo structure to this movement to display ideas and their elaboration to best advantage. In the episodes, the mazurka provides the main

impetus, although the principal ideas hover between the mazurka and the waltz.⁹ Chopin manipulates light and shadow through virtuosic outbursts and chromatic ambiguities. Filled with running passages and large leaps, this seemingly light-hearted movement requires highly virtuosic playing, and careful dynamic planning. It is crucial to bring out the inner flow of each episode without sacrificing the overall tone of this movement. The coda (m.405) transforms F minor turbulence into F major triumph: inverted and compressed motives culminate in right-hand fireworks over left-hand octave leaps. Yet victory remains bittersweet – the orchestra's suspended dominant seventh resolves only through the piano's cascading triplets, establishing the "delayed triumph" model for Romantic concertos.

Throughout, Chopin's timbral imagination redefines pianistic potential: velvet-textured bass ruminations, contrapuntal mists in middle registers, and stardust tremolos in the treble. His improvisatory ornaments function as psychological notation – appoggiaturas as heartbeats, gruppetti as hesitant breaths. Even restrained orchestration conceals poetic details: horn pedals evoking distant vespers in the *Larghetto*, clarinet-piano canonic dialogues as mirrored souls. His fondness for *bel canto* is again manifested in the second movement, highly contrasting themes within this ternary form shows his genius in combining operatic aria and recitative with piano timbre and technique.

The concerto's greatness lies in transmuting intimate confession into universal truth. The iconic A \flat theme resonates beyond Chopin's personal yearning to embody

⁹ Adrian Thomas, "Beyond the dance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, ed. Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 150.

humanity's eternal pursuit of transcendent love. Virtuoso passages transcend technical display – right-hand arpeggios map arrhythmic passion, left-hand leaps symbolize idealized distances. Formal architecture itself becomes metaphor: sonata-form conflicts, ternary self-reflection, and rondo cycles trace a youth's psychological odyssey from doubt to awakening. Here, Chopin crafts not merely a concerto, but a Romantic *Bildungsroman* (educational novel) in sound.

Scriabin's Piano Concerto, Op. 20

By the 19th century, with the development of larger orchestras, more powerful pianos, and heightened stylistic contrasts between soloist and ensemble, the piano concerto had become the instrumental equivalent of theatrical drama. However, European musical developments reached Russia relatively slowly. Prior to 1850, most Russian concertos lagged their European counterparts in refinement and sophistication. Yet by the 1870s-1880s, Russia rapidly emerged as a powerhouse of great piano concertos, beginning with those of Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky, and continuing through the concertos of Scriabin, Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich. The Scriabin Piano Concerto (1897) we shall discuss demonstrates both the rich heritage it inherited and the composer's confident command of the genre, though it breaks relatively little new stylistic ground. While its reputation remains somewhat modest, the work contains many sensitive, mercurial, and even childlike-innocent passages. It serves as a vivid "snapshot" of the composer's emerging artistic personality during his formative years.

This underrated work presents several unusual features. It achieves moments of chamber-like stillness and intimacy; its avoidance of grand gestures and virtuosic display distinguishes it from contemporary "warhorses." Across its three movements very few grandiose or brilliant passages occur, which are all in the key of F# major. Rather than concentrating its substance in the first movement where listeners are most patient and attentive, Scriabin "frontloads" the finale, making it nearly equal in duration to the first two movements combined. He also eschews traditional bright orchestration with brass and strings, favoring instead muted horns and soft woodwinds. As music scholar Jeremy Norris observes, Scriabin's Op.20 "is sketched in pastel shades rather than the strong primary colors of, say, the concertos of Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov."¹⁰ Furthermore, the concerto contains no cadenza – that conventional concerto staple typically providing an unaccompanied virtuosic moment for the soloist in the first movement (and often the third).

The opening measures of the first movement establish tonal ambiguity, highlighted by a muted horn solo presenting a descending three-note melody. Scriabin's horn opening recalls Brahms' Second Piano Concerto in Bb major (1881), whose first movement similarly begins with a slow horn call answered by the soloist. The fundamental motive presented in this sighing horn melody – three descending notes – becomes the melodic unit generating the entire movement. Scriabin emphasizes the motive's significance at each appearance through marked tenuto articulations. Years later, in discussions with Sabaneev, Scriabin would cite the

¹⁰ Jeremy Norris, "The Development of the Russian Piano Concerto in the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 1988), 140, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

relationship between this motive and the concerto's overall design as exemplifying the "principles" guiding his compositional process.

“Thought must always be present in the composition and creation of themes. It is expressed through the presence of a principle, which directs creativity. My themes, for the most part, I wrote always guided by some principle. And only for that reason do they differ in harmony. . . . For example, take my Piano Concerto. The bedrock here was the descending succession, against which bloomed the whole theme.” And he played me the theme of the concerto, which through these accented descending passages took on a completely different meaning.¹¹

The abundant use of triple meter and dance rhythms lends the concerto an overall buoyant character while recalling Scriabin's affinity for Chopin, whose creative impulses often found natural expression through mazurkas, waltzes, and other triple-time folk dance forms. While Chopin's influence on this work seems almost self-evident, few have noted how Scriabin transformed these borrowed elements into something distinctly his own. Consider one example: The contrasting secondary theme in the first movement (mm.59-66) presents a sprightly, skipping melody of childlike innocence that could easily fit into a waltz or mazurka. Initially stated in warm A major, Scriabin later reshapes its rhythm in subsequent sections of the movement, transforming it into a contrapuntal melody first carried by strings before gradually migrating to woodwinds and reeds. These motives recur throughout the

¹¹ Leonid Sabaneev, *Vospominaniia o Skriabine* [Reminiscences of Scriabin] (Moscow: Klassika XXI, 2000), 254-55.

development section, creating call-and-response dialogues between piano and orchestra that intensify the tension between restraint and release. In the development, the original theme undergoes continuous fragmentation and recombination. Brief motives derived from the opening gestures circulate among instruments, their chromatic inflections gradually building emotional intensity. Ultimately, in the coda, insistent fortissimo chords coalesce these motives into a climactic proclamation that provides decisive closure to the movement.

The second movement, an *Andante* in F# major, presents a chorale-like theme played *con sordino* by strings, followed by four variations. This solemn chorale is said to originate from Scriabin's childhood, though its exact source remains undocumented.¹² The inner voices of this austere theme intertwine expressively, creating rich harmonic resonance. His choice of a *Tema con variazioni* movement was unconventional for 1896, apart from the finale of Mozart's Piano Concerto No.24 in C minor (K.491). The first variation features glittering, unhurried piano figuration, the instrument content to remain in the background while clarinet, cello, and viola restate the theme. The second variation (*Allegro scherzando*) reanimates the energy, its mid-register chordal melodies and octave leaps recalling similar gestures from the composer's Second Piano Sonata (Fantasy-Sonata) while foreshadowing the keyboard writing Scriabin would perfect in his Fourth and Fifth Sonatas.

Chopin's influence is undeniable in the third variation, where darkened harmonies give the chorale theme ghostly echoes. In its final bars, Scriabin evokes

¹² Lincoln Ballard, "Symphonies and Orchestral Works," in *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 78.

funeral march rhythms, resonating with Chopin's Prelude in C minor, Op. 28, No. 20 – a work familiar to every amateur pianist. While many composers favored C minor for their most solemn music (countless examples exist in Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven), Scriabin reserves his deepest pathos for D# minor, the relative minor of his cherished "mystical" key F# major. It is in this D# minor that the third variation dwells gloomily. The ensuing fourth variation dispels the clouds with sunlit brilliance, the pianist's trills, turns, and ornaments celebrating this resurgence of vitality through birdsong-like flourishes. At the movement's close, Scriabin revisits the stylized textures of the first variation, achieving closure through circularity while maintaining playful dialogue between piano and orchestra. Throughout, this central movement breathes natural spontaneity, celebrating not only nature's purity and grandeur but also its mercurial temperament.

The finale stands as the concerto's longest movement and the one most likely to impress audiences in performance. Its exuberant main theme begins with an upward arpeggio vaulting to the piano's highest register before cascading downward. This cyclical motive – functioning as a rondo's unifying thread – repeatedly draws the music back to its home key after various episodic "wanderings," allowing listeners to use the vibrant arpeggio as an aural landmark. Scriabin further unifies the concerto by recycling rhythmic patterns from earlier movements, including variation techniques used in the second movement. In one later episode, the music explicitly channels the grand Romantic piano tradition, presaging Rachmaninov's idiomatic writing in his concertos. Unsurprisingly, this opulent melody evolves into the movement's climactic

culmination. Yet after such abundant invention, the movement concludes with distinctly unsettled, abrupt chords – an ending as idiosyncratic as it is memorable.

Conclusion

Due to limitations of length and duration, my doctoral research focuses primarily on Scriabin's early to mid-period piano music, a phase during which his works bear the most pronounced imprint of Chopin. However, it must be emphasized that Scriabin, as a profoundly unique figure in Western music history – though far less renowned worldwide than his contemporary Rachmaninov – transcends the reductive label of "Chopin's successor." Influenced by mysticism, Schopenhauer's philosophy, and Nietzschean thought, he harbored grand ideals and a sense of mission for music's evolution. The aforementioned piano concerto, his sole work in the genre, marked a watershed in his career; thereafter, he abandoned the concerto form entirely, dedicating himself to radical experiments in symphonic poems and piano sonatas. As a transitional figure bridging Romanticism and Modernism, Scriabin possessed immense ambition and audacity. His aesthetic vision can be summarized as "music as a vessel of cosmic energy" – he believed sound could trigger spiritual awakening and even catalyze the restructuring of the material world.

In his Fifth Piano Sonata (Op. 53), traditional tonality begins to disintegrate: quartal harmonies (e.g., C-F#-Bb-E-A-D) construct sonic spaces suspended beyond reality. Termed the "mystic chord," this structure no longer serves functional harmonic progression but seeks to awaken latent consciousness through the vibrations

of intervals. Scriabin's ultimate ambition manifested in his unfinished magnum opus *Mysterium*, for which he planned to build a circular theater in the Himalayas. This seven-day "apocalyptic ritual" would synthesize music, dance, light, and incense to collectively elevate humanity to a higher dimension through artistic force.

The concept of music as a "cosmogonic tool" directly informs his late symphonic poem *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (Op. 60). The score's "*clavier à lumières*" notation assigns specific colors to pitches, string clusters induce vertigo through microtones, and organ pedals symbolize the primordial roar of cosmic energy. By this stage, his music had fully abandoned narrative and emotional expression, pursuing instead a state of ecstasy akin to religious transcendence – as he wrote in his diary: "When the final chord resounds, the world will be reborn in flames."¹³

Chopin and Scriabin: one carves fissures in time with melody, the other ignites apocalyptic fuses through harmony. Chopin's music remains rooted in the soil of human emotion – even his gloomiest Funeral March clings to the lingering warmth of life; Scriabin transforms the piano into an altar, each note a spell cast into the void. The former teaches us poetic resistance against transience, the latter warns of art's allure to transcend humanity. While Chopin's nocturnes still whisper through urban twilight, Scriabin's legacy resembles an unfinished detonation. His harmonic experiments forged dangerous yet mesmerizing pathways for 20th-century music.

¹³ Lincoln Ballard, "Symphonies and Orchestral Works," in *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 99.

Together, they affirm: the essence of music remains eternally an act of devout inquiry into the unknown.

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