

ALEXANDER SCRIBIN
David C F Wright, DMus (1970)

All my articles about composers are not confined to his music, but are mini-biographies and so will include details of the life of the subject and his lifestyle, his character, behaviour, strengths and weaknesses. I realise that some people would rather believe a beautiful lie than an ugly truth and there are some many ugly truths in the life of Scriabin.

I am always suspicious when someone speaks about a composer and calls him both great and unique. I recall Aaron Copland saying that the truly great composers can be counted on the fingers of both hands and I suspect he is right.

Vladimir Ashkenazy is a musician of deserved international repute. In a BBC interview, he spoke about Scriabin's greatness and, seemingly, as a defence, stated that Scriabin is only understood in Russia. He also pointed out that there are Russians who suffer from Scriabinmania. This is not an attack on those who enjoy Scriabin's music. We

have maniacs in England who adore Elgar, points out one famous composer.



It was Scriabin's philosophy that created problems as well as his music. He believed that the world could be transformed and, indeed, saved through art. He had visions, or hallucinations. His music contains eroticism although he used the word ecstasy. He saw that the end of the world would, in fact, be a grandiose sexual act, a universal orgy in fact. It is hard to believe that anyone would think like this. He was, like Elgar and Britten, a megalomaniac and he wanted everyone to agree with him, and he promoted cults and aspects of spiritualism which were dangerous doctrines and were exposed as fraudulent. He was a cult figure himself.

He came from a military family of some nobility and was born on Christmas Day 1871. Of course, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on 7 January.

Scriabin's childhood has been the subject of many psychologists' investigations.

His mother was a gifted pianist, but Alexander became motherless when he was only a year old. His father was seldom at home being in the Foreign Service serving in Greece and Turkey. The boy was cared for by an aunt, Lyubov, who was only 20 when the boy was born. Throughout his life, Sasha, the pet name for Scriabin, blamed his effeminacy on the fact that he was surrounded by women as a child.

The Scriabin family were not intelligent at all. In fact, they were decidedly common and very embarrassed by Alexander's weird behaviour and mannerisms. He was short of stature, just over five foot tall, and, like many little men, acted big and arrogantly to compensate for his lack of height. He wanted to join the military and he put on a uniform when he was about eleven and joined the Cadets but was ridiculed and bullied because he was small, effeminate and weak.

He was already showing signs of serious mental instability which was to remain with him all his life.

As to music, he showed some early talent. At the age of eight he 'fell in love' and wrote parts of an opera called Lisa named after the little girl he regarded as his sweetheart. He admitted that his greatest interest was in vaginas.

The previous year, he had been taken to St Petersburg and heard the pianist Anton Rubinstein. Years later, he was to condemn all of Rubinstein's music as superficial. This alleged lack of depth actually exists in his own music.

Scriabin began his studies with Sergei Taneyev in 1884. Alexander remained in the Cadet Corps and, at a

school concert, he played some pieces written by his father's second wife and improvised a piece of his own. His fellow cadets were somewhat impressed and treated him more favourably thereafter. But it was obvious that he would never be a soldier. It was widely said that he was a pansy.

In his lifetime, Scriabin was not thought of as a composer but as a pianist.

Stravinsky said that his only ability was in his phenomenal playing. The pianist Vassili Safonov adored him and called him Russia's Chopin.

The narcissism of Scriabin created problems. This caused one of his teachers to dislike him. This teacher was Arensky who failed Scriabin in his exams. The pro-Scriabin camp state that Arensky was both a drunk and debauched man and that he found Scriabin's music to be too original. But Scriabin was a pain. Arensky had told him to compose an orchestral scherzo but the pupil wrote an overture to an opera. This disobedience led to Arensky insisting on a scherzo, and rightly so, and when it was eventually submitted, it was full of mistakes.

For the record, Arensky got on well with his other students including Grechmaninov and Rachmaninov.

Rimsky Korsakov found Scriabin to be self-opinionated and warped, strange and distorted.

One of Scriabin's works which has found few friends is his Piano Concerto in F sharp minor, Op 20. It is a seriously flawed piece and Rimsky Korsakov, the expert on orchestration, said that the orchestration was very poor and re-orchestrated it in part. Scriabin behaved atrociously about this as he had with Arensky. It has been proved that one alleged tune in the finale was written and orchestrated by Rimsky. This is testified by Glazuov and Rachmaninov.

Sergei Prokofiev called the concerto 'lack lustre' and refused to play it as did other famous pianists. Glazunov and Rachmaninov hated it. One said, "It proves that Scriabin has lost his mind", to which the other replied, "He never had a mind to loose!".

Alexander's effeminacy was now so severe and worrying that he was called Pussy, a definition used in the crude meaning and context in which that expression is used today. However, Scriabin had girl friends and boasted that he had ploughed many a virgin furrow.

His pomposity was further shown when Samuelson announced that he was to learn and pay all Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues. Scriabin responded that he had them all ready, all 32 of them! He was also trying to learn Balakirev's Islamey and Liszt's Fantasy on Mozart's Don Giovanni but he was unequal to these challenges and was violent at the piano. Consequently, he suffered pain and severe strain in both his hands.

He turned to writing his piano sonata now known as number one, Op 6. It is in F minor and has a tragic feel about it and a funeral march. Like Mahler it is full of angst and neurotic fear. His Prelude and Nocturne Op 9 for left hand alone was more successful.

His love and sex life was prolific. He fell in love with Natalya Sekerina who was only fifteen. It was for her that he wrote his only song in which he says that he can enter Natalya's body by the power of his mind. He wrote many love letters to her.

He was mentally ill. He turned on God and said that his own power was greater than God's power as seen in creation. God was not omnipotent. He was.

Scriabin graduated from the Conservatory in 1892 but with the minimum mark required to pass. For the next few years his occupation was 'socializing' which, in common parlance, meant alcohol and one night stands. He met the pianist Josef Hofmann and there was rivalry between them particularly when Natalya preferred Hofmann to Scriabin. He would drink himself silly and endure awful hangovers and even said that being drunk was sublime, spiritual and sexual ecstasy. This condition is often presented in his music

which is otherwise incoherent. But, on a happier note, he finally overcame the alcohol addiction. When he was drunk, his already serious mental instability was worsened.

His vanity was also shown in the care he took over his moustache to the extent of his behaviour being seriously unreasonable.

He was fortunate in that Mitrofan Belaieff published his music paying him 100 roubles for a sonata and 25 for a prelude. This was generous as Scriabin was little known and what was known about him was his scandalous life style.

Belaieff also paid for him to see psychologists, psychiatrists and neuropathologists such as Dr Wilhelm Erb of Heidelberg University who, at least, seemed to cure him of his nervous migraines. There was a genuine friendship between composer and publisher and they went on concert tours together and exchanged many letters. Belaieff was, in effect, Alexander's father, friend and crutch.

Although Belaieff was kind to Scriabin, the supporters of Scriabin complained that Belaieff treated Scriabin badly. By this, they probably meant that the publisher was pushing the composer to write music which, had he not done so, many works up to 1903, when Belaieff died, may not have been written which would have included the symphonies and the first four piano sonatas. Some have opined that the brevity of his pieces is due to the pressure Belaieffs asserted.

His piano preludes are very slight and inconsequential and, unlike the preludes of Felix Blumenfeld, Scriabin's preludes usually lack thematic material and purpose. They have nothing to say.

It is true that Belaieff was against Scriabin's marriage to Vera Issakovich in 1897. She was a Jew and apparently converted to Russian Orthodoxy. Anti Semitism was rife in Russia. Vera was an excellent pianist but her character was diametrically opposed to Scriabin. She had had three girls and a boy and the eldest girl died of a psychosomatic disorder probably as a result of tension in the house and the boy died of fever.

There were financial troubles and they relied on handouts from friends.

Safonov, now head of the Moscow Conservatory, offered Scriabin a professorship of piano there which he took but did little work as he only had about twelve pupils. He was not a good teacher and injudicious in his remarks with scathing comments about Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Brahms.

The head of the Vienna Conservatory was Paul de Conne who invited Scriabin to Vienna but he was turned down. That was a mistake for it might have been very advantageous for the Russian.

Like Liadov, Scriabin was a lazy composer. Most of his works are tiny as he was.

In 1898, he composed his Reverie in E minor, Op 24 for orchestra. It was premiered by Rimsky Korsakov but only plays for about three minutes and he was criticised for its brevity and so he began work on his Symphony no. 1 often referred to as Belaieff's Ninth. At least his symphonies and orchestral works are, in the main, not slight and indicate that he could write extended music.

Scriabin also attempted to write an opera in which the hero is himself, the magician of heavenly harmony with the power of love and the strength of personal wisdom. The hero also states, "I am the apotheosis of world creation. I am the aim of aims, the end of ends" and, remember, the hero is Scriabin himself. His philosophy was that everyone should do exactly what they wanted to do and that there should be no laws particularly moral ones. He was a nihilist and a loathsome man. Like Nietzsche he campaigned against morality.

The Scriabins parted in 1904 but Vera refused a divorce initially. However, she continued to play his music until her death in 1920.

His mental illnesses made him indecisive and this increased his bad temper. He resigned from the

Conservatory over a sex scandal. He composed *The Divine Poem* and poured out piano works from Opus 30 to Opus 41 in a short space of time.

He made friends with Boris Pasternak who was to win the Nobel Prize in 1958 for his novel *Dr Zhivago*. Pasternak also wrote a *Prelude* for piano.

From 1903, with his family life in tatters, Scriabin lived abroad for five years. He lived in Paris and then in Belgium where he met the notorious Helena Blavatsky who was a theosophist. Theosophy is a cult of various philosophies which professes that one can know God by spiritual ecstasy, direct instruction or a special virtual relationship with God. Blavatsky embraced every faith and cult and all the claims of saints, mystics and cult leaders as being valid. She claimed that she could prevent a group of strong men lifting a table by the power of her mind. Scriabin accepted all this nonsense and after Blavatsky was proved to be a fraud in 1914, he still believed this tosh. He also absorbed anthroposophy. Clearly his mental deficiencies enabled him to assimilate such falsities.

In 1905, Scriabin began living with Tatyana Fyodorovna Schloezer whom he knew from when she was fifteen. He persuaded Vera to divorce him and married Tatyana which was his reason for self-exile. They had two girls and a boy, Julian, who wrote four piano preludes but drowned in the Dnieper river in 1919 at eleven years of age in a boating accident.

Scriabin's new marriage did not stop his having affairs with other women and underage girls many of whom he raped.

To go back to 1903 while at the Conservatory he taught one day a week, at the Catherine Institute for Girls. In 1903, he had sex with an underage girl and there were other serious indiscretions.

In his years with Tatyana, his madness increased. He said that he was greater

than Christ and tried to emulate Him by walking on Lake Geneva as he was sure of his miraculous powers. Having been rescued, he began to preach about himself to fishermen from a boat. He believed that as Christ preached communism, which He did not, that Christ was, in fact, a Communist

In 1906 he went to the USA where he was not very well received. His philosophies bewildered and annoyed the Americans. He engendered a row with the publishers Belaieff and left that firm. Scriabin, like Britten, took offence easily and would not tolerate any criticism even if it was good criticism.

His music from about 1905 took on a different style which he described as his original thoughts since no one else wrote like this. He developed chords based on fourths but what he was doing was copying the innovators of Vladimir Rebikov who had starting using fourths, unresolved dissonances and the whole tone scale way back in 1898. Scriabin 'invented' the mystic chord built up of fourths but all of this was a code portraying his eroticism which he called ecstasy. It reveals his getting on top of a woman or girl and raising himself higher and higher in the sex act. The chord represented male dominance over a female in the sexual act and certain descending chords represented the relaxation after the act.

He also believed that keys had colours beliefs, which other composers upheld, but they disagreed as to what colours represented what keys.

Scriabin argued with Diaghilev over silly matters but, in 1908, there was a major step forward in Scriabin's life. He met the conductor, Sergei Koussevitsky, who was a Jew, and had married a rich woman Natalya Ushakova, his first wife was poor. The Koussevitzskys paid the sculptor Soudbinin to create a bust of Scriabin. Koussevitsky would pay Scriabin five thousands roubles a year and publish all his music. He sent Scriabin to the conductor Nikisch for lessons.

Koussevitsky conducted *The Poem of Ecstasy* with some success and the other orchestral works and Koussevitsky established Scriabin as an orchestral composer.

Some writers, or musicologists, wrongly state that Scriabin wrote five symphonies. But he wrote three. His other orchestral works were a Symphonic Poem in D minor of 1897, The Divine Poem of 1904, Poem of Ecstasy of 1908 and Prometheus of 1911.

Being so infuriatingly difficult led Scriabin to fall out with Koussevitsky.

This was over money. He turned to other conductors like Glazunov, who has been unfairly lampooned as a bad conductor. Scriabin was also thinking of divorcing Tatyana. He played his Piano Concerto with Rachmaninov reluctantly conducting. He also played it in London with Sir Henry Wood on the podium.

Scriabin's piano music from the fifth sonata onwards became more strange. He called two of them his demonic sonatas.

It was in London that he became ill. It started with a pimple on his upper lip under his moustache. It was lanced by a doctor. Scriabin began to write extensive notes about his music but on 4 April 1915 the pimple returned. His temperature soared. Moscow's doctors and specialists were summoned and incisions were made to his face. The pimple was infected with streptococcus staphylococcus. It was blood poisoning. He died on 13 April 1915 of septicaemia.

At his funeral, Rachmaninov, Taneyev and Scriabin's uncles were pallbearers. The composer Miakovsky said that Scriabin's death was as awful as the world was that was raging. His orchestral works had gained him some popularity in Russia and that was initially due to Koussevitsky's championship. His piano music was not popular.

I firmly believe that the character of a composer is evident in his music. The music is the man. Haydn was a cheerful and decent man as is his music. Mozart was a townie and he did not write rural music. Bruckner was profoundly spiritual as is his music. Mahler was ridiculed with angst. So is his music. Scriabin was mad or, to be charitable, mentally ill and, strange as is his music.

He was a predator around little girls and a serial womaniser. He also was involved in crude homosexual acts. Like a contemporary psychic, he believed that he was Christ at one time, proving how mad he was. He was involved in spiritualism and therefore into dangerous cults. Rubbish has been taught about him such as he influenced Prokofiev and Stravinsky. Even if that were true, he hated both of these composers.

SOURCES

Rimsky Korsakov	Orchestration Letters
Glazunov	Collected letters
Rachmaninov	Letters
Grechmaninov	My Life (first version)
Bernard Stevens	Music in Contemporary Russia

Personal correspondence and interviews the author had with Alfred Schnittke and Shostakovich when he came to Oxford in 1971

Copyright © David Wright 1970 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.