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Principles of Tonal Organization in Alexander Scriabin's Works after Op. 58

Throughout his life, Scriabin's harmonic language underwent an evolution. His late period style featured a radical break from traditional harmony. This article examines some of the innovations to be found in Scriabin's late works.

A general theoretical background on Scriabin's late period harmonic language is presented, as it is needed in order to understand the subsequent analyses. Likewise, main philosophical ideas pertaining to mysticism and theosophy, distilled from Scriabin's notebooks (recently published in 2018 in an English translation by Simon Nicholls and Michael Pushkin), are summarized.

A detailed analysis of his Etude Op. 65, No. 3 pinpoints the unique features of his late style and attempts to link certain compositional procedures found late period works after Op. 60, to general mystic ideas.

Lastly, implications for further Scriabin research are presented.

Keywords: Alexander Scriabin, Late Period, Etudes Op. 65, Mysticism, Theosophy, Harmony.

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Принципы тональной организации в произведениях Александра Скрябина после соч. 58

На протяжении всей жизни гармонический язык Скрябина претерпевал эволюцию. Его стиль позднего периода характеризуется радикальным разрывом с традиционной гармонией. В статье рассматриваются некоторые нововведения, которые можно найти в поздних произведениях Скрябина. Представлена общая теоретическая основа гармонического языка позднего периода Скрябина, необходимая для понимания последующих анализов. Точно так же суммируются основные философские идеи, относящиеся к мистике и теософии, дистиллированные из записных книжек Скрябина (недавно опубликованных в 2018 году в английском переводе Саймоном Николсом и Михаилом Пушкиным).

Детальный анализ Этюда соч. 65 № 3 выявляет уникальные черты позднего стиля композитора и позволяет связать определённые композиционные процедуры, обнаруженные в поздних произведениях (периода после соч. 60), с общими мистическими идеями.

Наконец, сформулированы выводы для дальнейших исследований творчества Скрябина.

Ключевые слова: Александр Скрябин, поздний период, Этюды соч. 65, мистицизм, теософия, гармония.

Throughout his life, Scriabin's harmonic language underwent an evolution. His earliest works were inspired by the compositions of Chopin, specifically their abundant use of dominant seventh chords with added dissonances. Likewise, Scriabin was influenced by Chopin's innovative pianistic textures and voice-leading techniques. Scriabin's early output (until roughly 1900) contained many works in the genres which Chopin earlier employed: namely, the Mazurka, Waltz, Impromptu, Prelude, Etude, and Nocturne. Scriabin assimilated many of Chopin's ideas pertaining to texture, chord spacing, and contrapuntal figuration. After 1900, his harmonic language began evolving at a meteoric pace.

In 1921, in an essay published in "Revue Musicale," Boris de Schloezer (Scriabin's brother in law), was the first to divide Scriabin's works into three periods [4, p. 11]. It is generally agreed upon that Scriabin's early stylistic period lasted through his Op. 25 (1899), his middle period through Op. 58 (1910) and his late period until his last completed work: Op. 74 (1914).

Scriabin's growing interest in theosophy and mysticism was shared by other Russian artists at the time. This included modernist painters Nikolai Roerich, Margarita Sabashnikova, and Vasily Kandinsky, poets Konstantin Bal'mont, Nikolai Minsky, Max Voloshin, and Andrei Belyi, as well as philosophers Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Berdiaev [2, p. 14]. Scriabin's notebooks (translated into English and published in 2018) reveal that it was his exposure to mysticism which inspired him to develop a new tonal language to express those ideas through music.

Walter Terence Stace (1886–1967), an English-born philosopher who taught at Princeton, wrote several books on mysticism and is often cited when the

subject is discussed. He described mysticism in his 1960 book *The Teachings of the Mystics*: "The most important, the central characteristic in which all fully developed mystical experiences agree... is that they involve the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate" [5, p. 14].

An examination of Scriabin's philosophical writings preserved in his notebooks (published in 2018 in an English translation by Simon Nicholls and Michael Pushkin) reveal that he was fascinated with mystic concepts years before they were expressed in his music. Several extracts from Scriabin's notebooks (c. 1904–1905) are reproduced below: "Creation is the act of distinguishing. Only a multiplicity can be created. Space and time are forms of creation, sensations are its content... States of consciousness coexist... Space and time is not separable from sensation. It, together with sensation, is one single creative act... And so I wish to create... to bring into being a multiplicity, a multiplicity within a multiplicity and a oneness within a multiplicity" [2, pp. 75–76].

In 1905 (the year he read Blavatsky's *La Clef de la Theosophie*), Scriabin asked a question, which he then answered in a radical manner: How can you express mysticism with major and minor? How can you convey the dissolution of matter, or luminosity? Above all, minor keys must disappear from music. Minor is an undertone. I deal with overtones. Oh, how I want to break down the walls of these tempered tones [1, II: p. 107].

By 1910, Scriabin developed an entirely new, non-diatonic system of harmony which, arguably, accomplished exactly that.

Scriabin's *Deux Morceaux*, Op. 59 (composed in 1910 but not published until 1912) were his first piano works to use this

new principle of tonal organization. As can most strikingly be observed in them, Scriabin has completely gotten rid of the traditional harmonic bass motion by perfect fifths at cadences and replaced it with motion by tritone. He has also abandoned key signatures. It should be noted that even as late as 1908, in his *Deux Morceaux*, Op. 57 (Example 1), Scriabin could not avoid the traditional V – I cadence, something which is entirely absent in his works starting from Op. 60.

Example 1

a) Alexander Scriabin. b)
Ending of Op. 57/ 1, Op. 57/ 2,
Désir Caresse Dansé



The ending of the Prelude Op. 59, No. 2 (Example 2) reveals Scriabin's new approach to harmony.

Example 2 Alexander Scriabin. Prelude Op. 59, No. 2, mm. 56–61

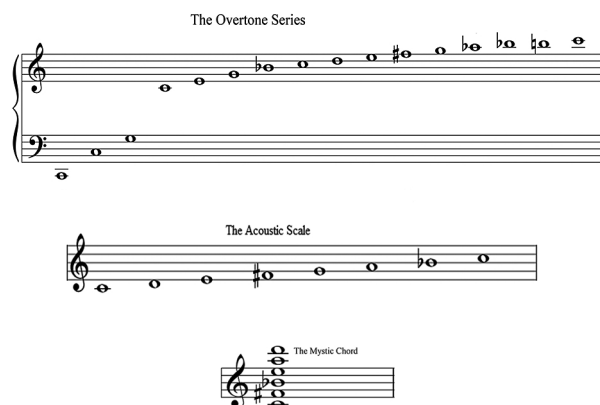


The most important new characteristics (first observed in the Op. 59 No. 2) are: the bass motion by tritone, the use of the acoustic scale as the main underlying mode, and chords stacked in fourths. In the last seven measures of the prelude, every pitch (except the D-flat in the final chord) is derived from the overtone series, particularly its upper partials containing the acoustic scale (see Scheme 1).

The D-flat in the final chord (Example 2) is derived from the octatonic scale rising

Scheme 1.

The “Mystic Chord”, also known as the “Synthetic Chord” and “The Chord of the Pleroma” is derived from the acoustic scale, based on the overtone series



from the same note: C. It has been generally observed that Scriabin's use of the acoustic scale, with the addition of two “foreign” notes derived from the octatonic scale built up from the identical initial pitch, is the central mode of pitch organization to be found in the works of his late period.

Scriabin himself wrote about his innovative approach to harmony in the late works: “Why were harmony and melody separated in Classical music? Because there was a polarity between tonic and dominant: the dominant harmony gravitated towards the tonic. My polarity is not that of [the] tonic and dominant, but rather of these two chords separated by a diminished fifth. It is completely analogous to the tonic-dominant progression, the cadence in the Classical system, only on a different level, one ‘storey’ higher” [3, p. 260].

Sabaneyev believed that this polarity was connected to Scriabin's philosophical beliefs. Bowers quotes Sabaneyev: “He theorized that the spirit of evil plays a sad role in Christian theodicy, but for Scriabin it was not something wicked at all. He was sympathetic to it and called it the creative spirit” [1, II, p. 232].

That is in fact a clear reference to Madame H.P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, a

book which Scriabin read closely in 1905. The concept of the polarity, specifically the tritone relationship (along with the static nature of the harmony) can be observed in Scriabin's 3 Etudes Op. 65.

After a Russian tour, the famous conductor Willem Mengelberg engaged Scriabin for three concerts in Holland in October 1912, and one in Germany the following month. In June, Scriabin vacationed in Beatenberg, Switzerland and late that month, Scriabin wrote to Sabaneyev: "I now inform you something pleasant for me... a composer whom you know had written three etudes. In fifths (horrors!), in ninths (how depraved!) and.... in major sevenths (the last fall from Grace!?) What will the world say?" [Ibid.]. Scriabin was referring to his Three Etudes, Op. 65.

Examining the tonal scheme of the Etudes Op. 65 set, one can discover a connection between the tonal centers of each etude:

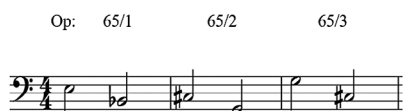
Op. 65/1: Tonal centers E and B-flat

Op. 65/ 2: C-sharp/D-flat and G

Op. 65/3: G and C-sharp/D-flat

When mapped out on a musical staff (below), it becomes clear that the tonal centers of each etude (there are always two because of the aforementioned tritone-link) belong to the same diminished seventh chord: G, B-flat, C-sharp, E.

Scheme 2



Thus, the Op. 65 is evidently Scriabin's only set of etudes with a discernible overarching method of tonal organization between works. His idea of limiting the right hand intervals entirely to 9ths, 7ths and 5ths created the need to make the top two voices the primary governing principle

in most of the sonorities. As the analysis of the Etude Op. 65/3 will reveal, the bottom note in the right hand is often non-harmonic. His extensive use of non-harmonic notes in the Op. 65 (due to the restrictive techniques used), results in a sound-world which is more dissonant than virtually all his other late period works.

Analysis of Scriabin's Etude Op. 65 No. 3: Form

The Etude Op. 65/3 can be divided into the following sections:

Section A: *Vivace*.

Tonal center: **G/D-flat** (mm. 1–16)
16 measures

Section B: *Impérieux*.

Tonal Center: **C-sharp/G** (mm. 17–38)
22 measures (**2 measures missing due to incomplete sequence)

Section B-1: *Impérieux*.

Transposed to **F-sharp/C** (mm. 39–62)
24 measures, with interpolated elements from the A section.

Section A: *Prestissimo*.

G/D-flat (mm. 63–78)
16 measures. Modified return of the *Vivace* material.

Section B: *Meno Vivo*.

C-sharp/G (mm. 79–102)
24 measures. Return of the *Impérieux* plus a coda

Scriabin himself stated: "I need to be exact [count the measures precisely] as to make the form crystal clear" [1, I, p. 332]. Scriabin's exceedingly clear phrase-writing, along with his sense of structure and symmetry in his works, was necessary in order to make the complex musical material accessible to the listener. Examining the

overall structure, the incomplete phrase in mm. 37–38 is an irregularity which results in the first “section B” being only 22 measures in length. As the previous sections were all 16 or 24 measures long (which allowed for neat 4 and 8-bar phrases), the incomplete 2-measure phrase is therefore quite noticeable. Scriabin further emphasizes it by placing it immediately before the shift in the texture (and tempo) in m. 39, and even adds the *poco accelerando* to sharpen the contrast between the sections (see Example 3).

Example 3 Op. 65/ 3, mm. 37–40



Aside from that subtle irregularity of phrase structure, the rest of the etude is mostly symmetrical in design. Note that Section A (G/D-flat tonal center) and Section B (C-sharp/G tonal center) are inversions of one another. The central F-sharp/C (“section B-1” in the chart of the overall form) is in fact a half-step away from the main tonal area. However, Scriabin skillfully avoids any implication of the leading tone, as the harmonic analysis will reveal.

Harmonic Analysis

Examining the Etude Op. 65, No. 3 one can notice that the slower-moving harmonic motion is the result of the limited number of possible sonorities which can be generated while the right hand throughout this etude is restricted to perfect fifths. The harmony (G-F-E-A-B) can easily be extracted from the figuration and is kept consistent throughout. This sonority is transposed and sequenced over the ascending bass notes: G, A, B in mm. 1–8 (Scheme 3), and that whole section is transposed in the next

eight-measure phrase (with the main bass notes E-flat, F, G) which cycles back to the initial “tonic”.

Scheme 3.

Harmonic reduction of mm. 1–8
(repetitions eliminated for clarity)



If one takes all the notes present in m. 1 and stacks them in fourths, a seven-note chord will be produced. This is most likely how Scriabin generated the main harmony of the piece (see Example 4).

Example 4 The pitches in m. 1 (except E-flat) neatly fit into a structure stacked by fourths



The Etude Op. 65/ 3 reveals an increasingly minimalist approach to harmony and texture. While the sonorities have become more dissonant, there is less contrapuntal activity and the music is strikingly less melodic. In the *Impérieux* section (m. 17), note that all of the added-note dissonances are in the right hand (in this section), above the alternating left hand seventh chords a tritone apart (Scheme 4). The top note of the right hand is treated as a melody, with the lower note in the right hand (along with the left hand harmonies) tailored to it.

Scheme 4 A reduction of mm. 17–22



Measures 29–32 are important to examine in order to understand how transitions between “tonal areas” are accomplished in this late-period work (Example 5). While there is no defined “key” in the diatonic sense in late Scriabin, the bass-line nevertheless establishes clear tonal centers.

Example 5 mm. 29–32



Examining mm. 29–32 (Example 8), the underlying progression is based on a voice exchange: the bass G natural is picked up by the top voice in the next measure. Scriabin once again uses the tritone link between seventh chords freely. The bass motion is best understood as an ascent by minor third from D-flat/C-sharp to E.

The Prestissimo recapitulation (from m. 63) is an exact repeat of measures 1–16. Likewise, the next section in mm. 79–86 is an exact repeat of mm. 17–24. The final 16-measure phrase (starting in m. 87) serves as a coda to the etude. It starts out as a continuation of the *Impérieux* material, and finishes with an eight-measure reference to the opening of the Etude Op. 65, No. 1, confirming that the Three Etudes Op. 65 were indeed envisioned as a cycle by Scriabin (Example 6 a, b).

Example 6 The ending of the Op. 65/1 is related thematically to the opening of the Op. 65/3

a) The ending of Op. 65, No. 3



b) The beginning of Op. 65, No. 1



Implications for Further Research

The analysis of the Etude Op. 65 No. 3 explored the various innovations of Scriabin's late period style. One possibility for further research is determining if Scriabin's last completed work, Five Preludes, Op. 74, which feature a higher level of dissonance than his preceding works, employ any new compositional techniques not found previously in his output. Chia-Lun Chang's dissertation on the Preludes Op. 74 presented an in-depth analysis of each prelude but did not venture into a comparison with earlier works. Another important topic for further research is Scriabin's treatment of thematic material in his late period Sonatas.

The progression towards the simplification of thematic material has been observed to some extent in the Etudes Op. 65. This topic is covered in far greater detail in my DMA dissertation “The Evolution of Alexander Scriabin's Harmonic Language and Piano Textures Across his Etudes Op. 8, 42 and 65. Undoubtedly, Scriabin's theme-constructions within larger scale forms evolved along with his harmonic language. Lastly, the surviving Mystery (Mysterium) sketches certainly are in need of detailed study.

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