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## THE PSYCHOANALYTIC DRIVE IN THE HARMONIC LANGUAGE OF ALEXANDER SKRYABIN

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*Skryabin was a true poet of tonal erotic caresses  
and he can torture and sting and torment and fondle  
and tenderly lull with pungent sonorities; there is a whole  
“science of tonal love” in his compositions.<sup>1</sup>*

(Leonid Sabaneyev)

Whilst Alexander Skryabin was composing music that supposedly embodied the emergence of consciousness,<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud was formulating theories of the human ‘drive’ – an unconscious energy source that inwardly stirred human beings into conscious action.<sup>3</sup> Despite a lack of evidence to suggest that Skryabin accessed Freud’s theories directly,<sup>4</sup> paraphrases of experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt in Skryabin’s abstruse notebooks certainly attest to a cultivated interest in psychology.

And Skryabin wanted his psychological research to spill-over into his musical compositions. One notebook entry declares, “Most of my musical poems have a specific psychological content.”<sup>5</sup> As early as 1904, Skryabin’s wife Vera records “Sasha reads a lot of philosophy and psychology and thinks all the while of his future compositions.”<sup>6</sup> That Skryabin drew an unclear distinction between psychology and philosophy is understandable; Freud’s ‘drive theory’ was derived from the same philosophical literature that Skryabin was steeped in; Arthur Schopenhauer’s concept of *the Will* was particularly influential to both men.<sup>7</sup>

Skryabin’s innovation was to integrate such ideas into his musical composition, an enterprise which was wholly in accord with the Russian ‘Silver Age’ aesthetic in which Skryabin was so embedded. According to Skryabin’s contemporary Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, Skryabin “musically re-created the movements of the will.”<sup>8</sup> Members of this aesthetic order believed, like Schopenhauer, that music could directly represent the motions of ‘the Will’ – a dynamic vision of Kant’s *thing in itself*.

In fact, Schopenhauer claimed that things were more intimate still – music was a ‘direct copy’ of the Will itself: it was no mere representation. Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps Skryabin’s favorite philosopher, also posited music

as the embodiment of all things Dionysian – a violent, intrusive, unmediated, raw energy.<sup>9</sup> These ideas were soon to shape a new discipline known as psychoanalysis, rising to its zenith perhaps in the 1960s with Jacques Lacan, who rigorously remodeled Freud’s drive theory.

For Freud, the drives were similar to Schopenhauer’s *Will*; they were the “forces that we assume to exist behind the tensions caused by the needs of the Id.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike *Instinkte* – particular organic needs – Freud’s *Triebe* are dynamic and variable.<sup>11</sup> *Instinkte* can be satisfied from objects in the external world such as food and water, but *Triebe* exert an interminable pressure upon the subject. Like a strong wind that can be gauged only by its effects on trees and buildings, the drives are impossible to observe in themselves; psychoanalysts can only infer them *indexically* through the behavior of their subject.<sup>12</sup> Drives are unconscious; they exist in a multiplicity; they can attach themselves to any part of the body although they become structured by the hegemony of the ‘genital drive’ in the human subject. Although Freud’s theory phased in and out of fashion Lacan recuperated it in his ‘Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis’, revisiting Freud with the benefit of his own clinical experience. Lacan’s primary concern was to deconstruct the object of the drive. He shows that its objective is simply to leave its circular path, move around its object, and return to its orbit: “What is fundamental at the level of each drive is the movement outwards and back in which it is structured.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, *the drive itself does not wish to be satisfied*. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan draws the following well-known diagram (Figure 1: Lacan’s Model of the Drive Circuit).

A typical drive will make a ‘demand’ for something, but upon realization that the demand will not satisfy it, the drive will return to its circular orbit. This mechanism involves the process of *desire*, which acts as a kind of fantasy screen and produces the illusion that the drive’s uncomfortable exist-

<sup>1</sup> Please, find all musical examples and endnotes on pages 6-12.

tence can become pleasurable. Therefore Lacan equates desire with interpretation, showing that in the act of interpreting the drive we bestow an object of desire upon it. He claims: “As it draws to an end, interpretation is directed towards desire, with which, in a certain sense, it is identical. Desire, in fact, is interpretation itself.”<sup>14</sup> For Lacan this process creates a fundamental *misrecognition* of the drive’s true goal and forces the drive to constantly miss its object and return – tail between its legs – to its laborious circuitous path.

Skryabin’s writings describe phenomena that are essentially ‘drives’ in different guises. For instance, he talks of ‘surges’ and ‘urges’ that motivate action (“Oh life, Oh creative Surge (wish [desire])! / All-creating urge”),<sup>15</sup> ‘pulsation’ (“Something began to glimmer and pulsate and this *something was one*”),<sup>16</sup> ‘energy’ (“absolute unity ... will to live, desire to live, desire for the other, the new, ENERGY”),<sup>17</sup> ‘impulse’ (“An impulse disturbs celestial harmony”)<sup>18</sup> or *Will* (“The Spirit ... creates its own World by its own creative Will”).<sup>19</sup> Continuing his Schopenhauerian premise, Skryabin transforms the Kantian *thing in itself* into a mobile motivating force (“Being as a whole wishes [desires] to be ... Being is the will to live”).<sup>20</sup> Foreshadowing Lacan’s insight that desire “merely seeks to go on desiring”, the youthful Skryabin also grasped that desire was self-perpetuating (“Sharp desire, voluptuous and crazed yet sweet / Endlessly *with no other goal than longing* [my italics] / I would desire”).<sup>21</sup> It is clear to see how the Freudian drive lurks beneath such pronouncements, but how does it figure in Skryabin’s music?

In musicology, the realms of philosophy and music share an unstructured relationship. In many respects, the project of bridging this chasm between the theoretical drive and musical substance has already been long under way. Ernst Kurth analyzed the ‘waves of energy’ which music excites, viewing chromaticism as *Will* – “an urge towards motion”, “potential energy”;<sup>22</sup> Leonard Meyer taught how musical ‘tendencies’ operate on a listener’s expectations;<sup>23</sup> Fred Lerdahl, following his work with Ray Jackendoff, formulated mathematical models of musical ‘tension’;<sup>24</sup> Daniel Harrison analyzed the ‘discharges’ flowing through Neo-Riemannian functional harmony.<sup>25</sup> Heinrich Schenker used similar language in 1935: “the fundamental line signifies motion, striving towards a goal, and ultimately the completion of the course. In this sense we perceive our own life-impulse in the motion of the fundamental line, a full analogy to our inner life.”<sup>26</sup> And again, he claims, “[each pitch] is possessed of the same inherent urge to procreate infinite generations of overtones.”<sup>27</sup> Particularly interesting in this regard is the Russian analytical tradition: Alexander Milka used the term “tyagatenie” in the 1960s, which as one commentator on Russian analytical techniques, Ildar Khananov, explains, means “drawing to”, “need for resolution” and “urge”;<sup>28</sup> Gregory Conjus, Schenker’s contemporary, wrote about harmony’s “act of creative will” in 1933, coining the term “pulse wave” in reference to Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ and Bergson’s ‘élan vitale.’<sup>29</sup> What are *life impulse, energy, tension, urge, tendency* and *discharge* but theories of the Freudian *drive* ‘by any other name’?

One particular type of drive energy in music is a concern to many of these theorists – the dominant chord and its relationship to a tonic. As Rameau claimed, the need for a dissonant sonority to resolve “drives” all tonal music.<sup>30</sup> Steve Larson’s examination of Schoenberg’s op.15 mentions this ‘drive’ from chord V to chord I, and this is particularly pertinent to a discussion of Skryabin, whose music is strongly based around the structure of the dominant seventh chord. Theorists often correspond this to his musical theories of desire and tension/release patterns:

That all Skryabin’s late-style should be thought of as “dominant” in origin is logical and consistent, not only with the transitional style trait of prolonging the resolution tendency, but also with Skryabin’s philosophy that creativity was for him an unceasing striving for an elusive goal. The tendency of a dominant chord structure to resolve to its tonic is perhaps the strongest tension-releasing characteristic of tonal music.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst Skryabin’s harmony is often described as ‘dominant’ based, a typical analysis of one of Skryabin’s *mysterious* sonorities would cast the chord as a single dominant harmony. Taruskin asserts that the *mystic chord* is a “chord that expresses the dominant function”, whilst Peter Sabbagh’s dissertation illustrates how Skryabin’s harmony derives exclusively from the dominant-seventh complex.<sup>32</sup> Under these analyses such a chord would need to discharge its tension into a single tonic chord, yet this would seem to be at odds with the definition of the ‘drive’ which is an ambiguous and synchronically multivalent phenomenon. But if we break Skryabin’s sonorities down into their component parts and examine their discharge patterns, we realize that such chords often contains multiple dominant elements – we can call them *drives* – which threaten to pull the chord in numerous simultaneous directions. Take for example the standard ‘Skryabin chord’ made famous by its persistent use in Skryabin’s fifth Symphony, *Prometheus*. Skryabin’s sonority is poised between two dominant seventh structures that reach towards a subdominant and the dominant of C major via a C<sup>7</sup> drive (leading to an F triad) and a D<sup>7</sup> drive (leading to a G triad) (Figure 2: Breakdown of the Mystic (Prometheus) Chord). This is far from clear ‘bitonality’ however as these dominant ‘elements’ are neatly welded together. It is possible that we experience the Kantian sublime in these moments (as formulated by Žižek in his discussion of Rossinian opera) as a destabilizing excess of demands that become impossible to process.<sup>33</sup>

Yet to interpret these chords in this way, evidence of these elements discharging individually into ‘tonic’ elements would be desirable. In m.4 of the late Poem op.71, no.2, we find one such example. Here a D<sup>7</sup> drive lurks beneath the first three measures, whilst a marginal C<sup>7</sup> drive breaks through the second beat of the opening measure, formed from the pitches C-E-Bb. Both of these drives recur in m.3 when the C<sup>7</sup> now shifts to the bass register and the D<sup>7</sup> runs through the chromatic upper lines, to culminate in the C-F# tritone. The interest here lies in m.4 when both elements discharge their tensions individually into an F<sup>7</sup> drive element in the left-hand and a G element in the right-hand (Figure 3:

Poem, op. 71, no. 2). A similar procedure occurs in the earlier Etude Op. 56, no. 4 where, in the opening measures, a disjunctive and seemingly disorganized chain of discharges can be observed (Figure 4: Etude, op. 56, no. 4).

In m.1 discharge is found only in the upper C#-G tritone which resolves inwards to the D(Cx)-F# thirds, seemingly dislocated from the more overt bass motion from B<sup>7</sup> to G#<sup>7</sup>. In mm. 2-3 this patterns is transposed onto a C<sup>7</sup> tritone (E-Bb) in the upper voice whilst a D<sup>7</sup> drive occurs in the bass. As in op. 71 these discharge as separate elements to F and G<sup>7</sup> chords, but in op. 56 the drives are spatially inverted (turned upside down), showing that Skryabin's mysterious sonorities cannot be regarded as a single, unambiguous dominant-based form of desire.

Yet throughout the course of this work, Skryabin reduces the intensity of these chaotic harmonic exchanges into something more singular and focused, presenting the single chord in favor of the multitude (Figure 5: Etude, op. 56, no. 4).

A strong bass cycle of fifths progression runs from Eb to Gb twice in the second half of the piece until Skryabin closes with a pseudo-cadence on Gb, distorted by the preservation of the dominant Db above the Gb resolution. This kind of teleology is very common in Skryabin's middle period works (1903-1911). Indeed, another piece, programmatically entitled *Désir* ends very much like this, with a 'perfect' cadence in C. *Désir's* op. 57 companion piece continues this topic and moves steadily towards a pure C major chord via a long-range cycle of fifths stretching from C to Db (Figure 6: *Désir*, op. 57, no.1; Figure 7: *Caresse Dansée*, op. 57, no. 2, mm. 41-47; Figure 8: *Caresse Dansée*, mm. 55-59).

This trajectory maps neatly onto the Lacanian drives that become diachronically out-laid into a more focused object of desire: in these pieces – a tonic chord. Thus what we witness aurally through these drive-based harmonies is the process of 'interpretation' which Lacan equates with the mechanism of 'desire'. Of course, it is we as listeners who are actually doing the interpretative work, and therefore, it is *our* desires that are aroused, but it is as if the music *itself* selects a drive from the chaotic miasma and allows it to flourish until the end, diminishing the importance of the others. The music helps us to interpret by essentially interpreting *itself*.

But for Lacan, this 'interpretation' of the drive and its sublimation into a focal point of desire is a fundamental 'misrecognition' of what the drive actually wants. The drive actually craves its circuitous orbit; desire is a fundamental illusion – a fantasy that goes only a little way towards articulating the drive by providing it with the voice of the singular rather than the multiplicity that prevails in the unconscious. Skryabin himself began to musically realize this idea in his later works. He started to shy away from concluding pieces with blazing tonic chords and, in his later years, he was content to outlay the multiplicity of drives and allow them to rotate rather than progress. In such late pieces as the previously examined Poem op. 71, no. 2 Skryabin oscillates be-

tween four minor-third nodes – D, F, Ab and B. These lurk in the strong bass drives which are locked into this static harmonic orbit (Figure 9: Poem, op. 71, no. 2, mm. 1-18).

Their self-replicating transposition scheme denies any possibility of fifth-based cadential demands and continues in a potentially endless cycle. But Skryabin, in his late style, prefers to leave the drive conflict open. Each drive expresses itself as freely at the end of the piece as at the beginning. Thus the final moment of Poem, op. 71, no. 2 contains identical drives to the opening (C<sup>7</sup> and D<sup>7</sup>), though in a differently spaced chordal sonority (Figure 10: Final Moment of Poem, op. 71, no. 2).

In this way Skryabin moved from desire-based mechanisms that orientate a chaotic plurality of drives towards a tonal object, in favor of a more objective portrayal of the noumenal human drive that lies beneath the 'fantasy' of wholeness that desire produces. Nowhere is this more telling than in the final moments of Skryabin's two most famous pieces, the over-blown, over-sexed *Poem of Ecstasy*, op. 54 and his color symphony, *Prometheus*, op. 60. In the earlier *Poem of Ecstasy* a C major chord is indicated early in the piece as a tonal centre, and the strength of the G as dominant throughout the work means that the colossal cadence in the final moments seems to be the perfect satisfaction of the drive through desire; we have been teased with this tonic chord throughout the piece and finally we achieve it in the most flagrant manner. Yet the gigantic F# chord in the final moments of *Prometheus* has nothing like the same status, striking our ears as wholly inauthentic – a false ending; one of Adorno's "impotent clichés".<sup>34</sup> Harrison's examination of the approach to this chord reveals how it gains "tonic function by means of its structural position alone." According to Harrison, we wish to hear the F# triad as the subdominant of Bb, but the "Pavlovian association of the tonic and compositional conclusion" gets the better of us.<sup>35</sup> This chord is supposed to dupe us into thinking that it was a logical deposit for the raging drives that Rimsky-Korsakov called "unmitigated tension".<sup>36</sup> And yet, by including it, Skryabin exposes something profoundly truthful about the nature of desire: it is precisely this disconnected fantasmatic element that deceives us into feeling drive-satisfaction. But of course, for Freud, Lacan and seemingly Skryabin, beneath these 'misrecognised' objects of desire, remain the pulsating drives which exert their interminable pressure and which ultimately refuse to be extinguished by any externally imposed object.

It is possible that this approach to analyzing music may indicate a new methodology for coping with complex chromatic harmony. Closely mirroring the human *drive*, the true gift of 20th century music is ambiguity, which analysts (and humans themselves) desperately try to suppress. But in addition to analyses based on 'realized' musical procedures it is important to note the many unrealized potential drives that pulsate, like the drives of the human subject, in 20th century music.

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