

Prelude Op. 9 No. 1 for the Left Hand by Alexandr Skryabin

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Abstract: *This article aims to analyze one of the masterpieces that have conquered concert halls around the world, Skryabin's Prelude op. 9 no. 1 for the left hand. A miniature piece having the clear, classical structure of a tripartite lied. It consists of two periods, the first one comprising two equal-sized motifs and ending in a cadence on the dominant of the tonality. It had begun with an octave leap, a fact that amplifies the sonority, giving it a certain tension. The prelude ends with a codette in which the accompaniment formulas in arpeggios arches, alongside the repeating of the initial motif cell, stay pithy. Pianists are attracted by the challenge of this composition, which, among others by the same composer, makes them develop great piano skills and achieve high interpretative mastery.*

Keywords: *Skryabin, prelude, nocturne, left hand, piano.*

1. Introduction

One of the most extraordinary figures of universal musical culture – „no one was more famous during his lifetime, and few were more quickly ignored after his death.” (Harvey, 2000) – Russian composer and pianist Alexandr Nicolaevici Skryabin, was born on 6 January 1872 in Moscow, the city where he would find his premature ending on 27 April 1915.

He shows early exceptional musical skills, beginning to take piano lessons with the renowned professor N. Zverev (among whose students at that time were Rachmaninov and Goldenweiser), young Skryabin being professor's favourite, and dedicating him the *Nocturne în f minor op. 5*. Although the master tries to make him divert from composition, young Skryabin is more and more attracted by this field, his first important work dating from 1886, *Study in c sharp minor op. 2 no. 1*.

„At that time he was very in love with Chopin, often sleeping with a score by Chopin under his pillow and, at the age of fourteen he composed the study in c sharp minor op. 2, in Chopin's spirit but, at the same time, a small masterpiece.” (Schonberg, 1997, 493). Admitted to the Moscow Conservatoire in January 1888, he

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studies composition with Taneiev, counterpoint and harmony with Arenski, piano with Safonov, „obtaining the first prize for piano in 1892” (Larousse, 2000, 456), becoming together with Rachmaninov the best pianists of the Conservatoire. „When we recall the personality of Skryabin - at least, the gentle and fragile outer man - it seems strange to think how narrowly he escaped an uncongenial military career. It was chiefly owing to the interest which he inspired in Professor Taneiev, who gave him private lessons when he was ten years old, that he was taken away from the Cadet School and permitted to study at the Moscow Conservatoire, where he finished his course in 1891. He was then twenty, and had composed a few pianoforte pieces - the Etudes and Mazurkas, which were a kind of youthful homage paid to his idol, Chopin.” (Newmarch, vol. 56, no. 868). „In 1891, in a further bout of pianistic competitiveness, Skryabin overstrained his right-hand practicing Liszt's *Don Juan* fantasy; when forbidden by a doctor to play, he turned to practicing with his left hand and elaborated a virtuoso left-hand paraphrase of a Strauss waltz (the strength and subtlety he subsequently developed in his left-hand technique is reflected in much of his later writing.” (Grove 2001, 223).

2. Alexandr Skryabin – Prelude op. 9 no. 1 for the left hand

Skryabin`s „ works up to 1903 (the year of Piano Sonata no. 4) bear witness to the immense influence of the piano writing of Chopin and Liszt...” (Grove, 2001, 3). Prelude op. 9 no. 1 for the left hand was composed by Skryabin in 1894, at a time when, with his right hand suffering from tendinitis, he thought he would never again be able to play the piano. Resigned but still inspired by this sad misfortune, he dedicates to the left hand works of genius, meant to know celebrity. One of these is the prelude op. 9, no.1, a piece that proved to be so charming that, during a long tour Skryabin had in the United States of America in 1906-1907, he was called „Chopin of the left hand”.

3. Analysis of Prelude op. 9 no. 1, for the left hand

It is a miniature piece, having a clear, classical structure, we could say even exemplary, of a simple tripartite lied.

The first period, consisting of two equal-sized phrases, each having two motifs in its composition, opens on a harmonic function adjacent to the tonic of c sharp minor. The beginning that moves next to the tonality gives the impression of estrangement, emphasizing the atmosphere of sadness that marks the work from one end to the other. The downward direction of the sequences has the same role, as well as the ostinato accompaniment of the double notes enveloping the melody. (Figure1)

A. Scriabine, Op. 9, №1.

Andante.

Piano.

Fig. 1. A. Skryabin - Prelude op. 9 no. 1, measures 1-4

The second phrase brings two motifs that dynamize the discourse a little, by enlarging the interval and by the ascending chromatic movement, accompanied by the arpeggios in a wide position. (Figure 2)

Fig. 2. A. Skryabin - Prelude op. 9 no. 1, measures 5-8

The first period ends in a cadence on the dominant of the tonality – the chord of G sharp Major, so the second period leads directly to the basic tonality when its first motif ends. This had begun with an octave leap, a fact that amplifies the sonority, giving it a certain tension. (Figure 3)

The image shows a musical score for measures 9-12 of A. Skryabin's Prelude op. 9 no. 1. The score is in F# major and 3/4 time. It features a piano introduction with a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The melody is marked 'cresc.' and the bass line is marked 'p'.

Fig. 3. A. Skryabin - *Prelude op. 9 no. 1, measures 9-12*

In the following measures, the distances between sounds increase greatly; on the one hand, the melody is permanently doubled at the octave, the progressive movement by semitones is replaced by large sevenths and, on the other hand, the bass voice trajectories describe broad arches. (Figure 4)

The image shows a musical score for measures 13-17 of A. Skryabin's Prelude op. 9 no. 1. The score is in F# major and 3/4 time. It features a piano introduction with a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The melody is marked 'f' and the bass line is marked 'dim.'.

Fig. 4. A. Skryabin - *Prelude op. 9 no. 1, measures 13-17*

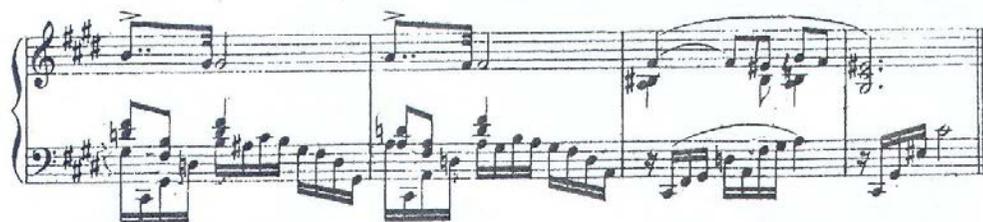
The return of A happens on the same tonal function of the VIth step, giving the feeling that everything is unchanged. But the second phrase doubles in size, the cadence on the tonic requiring the broadening of the motifs. (Figure 5)



The image shows a musical score for the left hand of the Prelude Op. 9 No. 1 by Alexander Scriabin. It consists of three systems of music. The first system is a short fragment. The second system contains measures 23 through 26, showing a melodic line in the right hand and a more active accompaniment in the left hand. The third system contains measures 27 through 30, where the melodic line features a prominent trill and the accompaniment continues with rhythmic patterns. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4.

Fig. 5. A. Skryabin - *Prelude op. 9 no. 1*, measures 23 – 30

The prelude ends with a codette in which the accompaniment formulas in arpeggios arches, alongside the repeating of the initial motif cell, stay pithy. (Figure 6)



The image shows the final four measures (31-34) of the Prelude Op. 9 No. 1 by Alexander Scriabin. The music is a codetta. The right hand features a melodic line with a trill and a final cadence. The left hand provides accompaniment with arpeggiated chords and rhythmic patterns. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4.

Fig. 6. A. Skryabin - *Prelude op. 9 no. 1*, measures 31-34

4. Conclusions

„The piano, this *small Hercules*, as it was called by Edmond Rostand,...and which later on will become *not an instrument, but one hundred* under the fingers of Anton Rubinstein” (Popa 1994, 8) is „however, of all instruments, the one that influences most musical composition.” (Chartier 1969, 98). Due to its exceptional characteristics, the piano is, in its way, a miniature orchestra, and it was natural that composers explore the specific possibilities of the instrument in order to enrich and create new forms, unusual, specific for the piano – such as works for the left hand... Skryabin dedicated to the left hand literature valuable creations, of profound expression, through which the literature of that genre consolidated its identity. „Hypersensitive, gifted with a wonderful sense of fine perception and an unusual capacity of perceiving reality ... in creation and interpretation, Skryabin is a lyric ...” (Iliuț 1998, 32), which is fully reflected in the analyzed work, one among the masterpieces that have conquered concert halls around the world, pieces bearing the mark of the creative genius of a great composer, Alexandr Skryabin, stands out: the *Prelude op. 9 no.1*. Pianists are attracted by the challenge of these compositions, which once resolved makes them develop great piano skills and achieve high interpretative mastery.

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