

Interpretive trends in *24 Preludes, Op. 11* by Alexandr Scriabin

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Abstract: *The performance of Alexander Scriabin's Preludes Op. 11 poses distinct problems and opportunities for contemporary pianists. These preludes, written in all 24 major and minor keys, embody the emotional profundity and developing harmonic language of late Romanticism, leading to Scriabin's more avant-garde compositions. Contemporary performance practice emphasizes the necessity of reconciling technical accuracy with deep expressiveness, mirroring Scriabin's philosophical and synesthetic concepts. This paper examines interpretative methods, highlighting rubato, dynamic subtleties, and pedaling strategies, which are crucial for conveying the ambient and frequently mystical characteristics of the preludes. This study seeks to elucidate the historical context of the preludes and their reception within the modern piano repertory, aiming to offer insights for attaining authenticity and uniqueness in performance.*

Key-words: *Scriabin, interpretive trends, preludes, mysticism, symbolism, piano performance, musical analysis*

1. Introduction

Alexandr Scriabin was pivotal to the symbolist movement in 20th-century Russia and was profoundly influenced by the contemporary symbolist authors. He ultimately possessed a grand and comprehensive view of art in contrast to the more radical theurgists of Russian symbolism and Eastern mystics. He is consequently engaged with the fundamental concepts of Symbolist dramaturgy, as well as issues pertaining to aesthetics and religious messianism. He focused on perception and synesthesia, color and light, the significance of astral and mythic experiences, and the veneration of art.

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Scholars who concentrate exclusively on the mystical ambitions of Scriabin's significant compositions overlook a crucial facet of his career: despite his advanced harmonic techniques and his pursuit of grand ecstatic effects in his sonatas and orchestral pieces, Scriabin fundamentally retained a strong commitment to formalism.

His compositions frequently demonstrate his sensitivity to minute nuances and his fascination with intricate, nuanced relationships, executed with exquisite precision. Scriabin focused on "...creating structures of varying proportions and symmetries, initially tallying the number of measures in a composition, such as the Seventh and Eighth Sonatas" (Baker, 1986, 12). The composer described his approach as a "strict style," stating: "...There is nothing arbitrary. ... I compose based on a clearly defined principle."

Regrettably, he failed to elucidate the processes and principles of his method. Scriabin was among the select composers who successfully connected conventional tonality with authentic atonality, making it fitting for his music to be analyzed in a series of studies on twentieth-century composers.

1.1. Interculturality in Scriabin's *Preludes, Op. 11*

Interculturality in Alexander Scriabin's piano compositions is evident in the amalgamation of Western and Eastern musical elements, mirroring his cultural background as well as his philosophical and creative perspectives. Scriabin's early compositions, including his preludes op. 11 and his first sonatas, are profoundly shaped by the Western Romantic style, particularly Chopin. The formal frameworks, melodic sensibility, and piano technique evoke European Romantic aesthetics.

Eventually, Scriabin embraced a harmonic vocabulary that transcended conventional tonality, influenced by the harmonic advancements of Wagner and Debussy. Scriabin was influenced by Eastern mystical and religious philosophies, particularly in his later compositions. These concepts are manifested in unconventional soundscapes, suspended harmonies, and introspective atmospheres.

One of his harmonic and rhythmic methods indicates a connection to eastern music, exemplified by pentatonic scales or unequal modes, which evoke musical traditions from Southeast Asia and India.

Scriabin was captivated by the correlation between sound and color, a concept influenced by the synesthetic experiences present in diverse cultural traditions. In several later pieces, including *Prometheus: Fire Poem*, he endeavors

to build a comprehensive creative experience that amalgamates music, light, and movement.

2. Scriabin and the Russian Symbolism

Since the 1920s, Alexander Scriabin's music has undergone significant evolution. From 1910 to 1925, Scriabin, in his roles as composer, pianist, and individual, elicited considerable admiration and even fervent adulation. Subsequently, the profound allure of Scriabin's music diminished. Today, it no longer resonates with listeners as it once did. Scriabin is widely esteemed, particularly for his harmonic breakthroughs and imaginative multimedia endeavors, however he is hardly regarded as a formidable genius. Since the mid-20th century, his music has periodically faced censorship for being arid, mechanical, and uninteresting (Leikin, 2011, 35).

Undoubtedly, a significant element contributing to Scriabin's remarkable appeal at the turn of the 20th century was his profound alignment with the *zeitgeist*. This era represents a significant phase in Russian cultural history, commonly referred to as the Russian artistic renaissance or the Silver Age of Russian culture—a time of unparalleled flourishing in poetry, music, visual arts, theater, and innovative philosophy. This marked the inception of the Russian symbolist movement, grounded in religious and intellectual foundations that were supposed to be comprehensible just to those initiated into the enigmatic domain of symbols.

2.1. Musical Symbols in Scriabin's *Preludes, Op. 11*

Natalia Sukhina, in her dissertation "*Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915): Piano Miniature as Chronicle of his Creative Evolution; Complexity of Interpretive Approach and its Implications*," (Sukhina, 2008, 44) synthesized all the symbols used by Scriabin in his works, as follows:

The mystic chord typically emerges in the harmonic lexicon of the late period, particularly in works created between 1908 and 1910, such as *Prométhée*. Scriabin's musical approach oscillates between diatonic and tonal elements; however, the harmony appears as an oddity inside a tonal context. In the later compositions, the mystic chord connects octatonic and tonal scales in a non-tonal manner, permeating the entire piece. It establishes a mystical oneness and serves as the origin from whence all harmonic and melodic structures emanate. In the later compositions, the mystical chord emerges at both commencement and

conclusion, serving as a generating force, a latent energy, and an enigmatic element that guides the entirety of the work.

The fanfare motif is used incessantly in both early and later works. It typically manifests as an anacrusic formation of one to three notes, succeeded by a 'sustained' note, frequently in an inverted dotted rhythm (eighth note followed by a dotted quarter note). Fanfares are predominantly declarative, characterized by their intimidating nature and greater emphasis on gestural form rather than intervallic substance. Scriabin's musical depiction of the motif implies a summons of supernatural, potent, or enigmatic origin. He positions the fanfare motif as the opening statement and at structurally pivotal moments.

Eroticism is a significant theme in Scriabin's music. Musically, they exhibit lyrical qualities, characterized by a sad essence produced by nascent semitones, ascending melodies, and pronounced chromaticism. An improvisational rhythmic style characterized by creative methods including arpeggiated chords and slurs that often obscure unaccented beats, along with a rhythmic inclination towards triplets, fosters a sense of inactivity and languor by undermining a robust sense of meter and harmony.

In Scriabin, **the motif of light** is articulated through various trills, tremolos, and other embellishments that signify light and, by extension, heavenly illumination. Scriabin perceived trills as palpitations, and tremolos as atmospheric vibrations, and a source of illumination. In compositions designated by Scriabin as Satanic, divine illumination manifests as witchcraft.

Scriabin perceived the motif of flight as the connection between the material and spiritual realms. Scriabin's flying motif conveys a sense of dynamism and motion, juxtaposed with the static, languorous material of the Eternal Feminine, characterized by brief, swift arpeggios, occasionally commencing with a sudden upward leap.

3. Scriabin - 11 Preludes, Op. 11

While there is no documentation of Bach's impact on these compositions, it is reasonable to assert that Bach was undoubtedly in Scriabin's thoughts, given the total of 48 preludes. The preludes, Op. 11, were composed between 1888 and 1896. Scriabin did not create the 24 preludes in a sequential manner. In this study, we have chosen not to analyze all the preludes from Scriabin's Op. 11, focusing instead on a selection of representative pieces that best illustrate the diverse technical, and stylistic facets of the collection, ensuring a more in-depth exploration of their interpretative challenges within the constraints of this research.

3.1. *Prelude in C Major, Op. 11, No. 1*

This prelude exemplifies some characteristic aspects of Scriabin's methodology within the genre including breadth, structure, and thematic development. The complete composition, comprising only twenty-six measures, is found on a singular concept: a quintuple figure in 2/2 meter that persistently intersects the bar line by commencing two quarter notes prior to the main beat.

The Prelude Op. 11 No. 1 by A. Scriabin has an ambiguous system, the sonorities bring a modal system, but there are numerous chains in which it appears tonal elements; example: measures 7-9, in which there is a dominant chord V7 that resolves to the tonic. Initial segment has 8 measures with an auftakt. The entire prelude is founded on the initial motif with an anacrusis. This motif comprises three cells, each containing five notes. The initial cell, characterized by the auftakt, exhibits a descending scale, with descending quarter notes alongside a descending minor third note. The subsequent cell demonstrates a sinusoidal trajectory, initially displaying a steady rising (D-E) movement, followed by an ascending perfect fourth leap, and thereafter dropping with a gradual descent from the ground, culminating in a descending minor third leap. The subsequent cell replicates the initial cell, but the last cell represents a variation of the first, concluding with a C sound instead of a D sound, so creating an alternative ending to the initial motif. The remaining motives will possess an identical structure, albeit the intervals and initial sounds will differ.

Section two comprises 10 measures, is lengthier than the first section, and features distinct language. The cells in section B differ from those in section A in the arrangement of the intervals. In the initial cell, the interval of the descending straight line is observed for the first time (measure 9, 2nd and 3rd half note). Notwithstanding the variation in intervals, the significance of the cells stays unchanged. Beginning at measure 13 with the upbeat, the musical discourse escalates, with modulations occurring in each cell, in contrast to the initial section where modulations emerged every four measures.

Due to the bass, commencing with the second measure, we can illustrate the coupling of the cells in pairs (the bass forming a sequence: D#-E, C#-D). From measure 15 with the upbeat to measure 16, an ascending line is present in the bass voice (F-G-Ab-A), followed by a sustained G (pedal). This pedal on G can be interpreted as an enhanced cadenza for the subsequent part.

The third segment consists of 7 bars, and its phrasing will alter entirely from that of the first two sections. Following a two-bar cadence in G, the tonic C emerges at the commencement of the third part. The bass features a pedal on C, despite being interrupted by cell no. 2 at the prelude's outset. At the conclusion of

the prelude, the initial cell reappears in the last measures as a leitmotif. This is reiterated incessantly for two measures, concluding with the note D on the first iteration and with the note C on the subsequent three iterations. The prelude concludes magnificently with a tonic chord in fortissimo.

The melody predominantly descends, imparting a sad and depressing quality. Generally, we observe falling perfect fourths, minor thirds, and ascending sequences. The prelude predominantly emphasizes the two-cell structure, with Scriabin employing the method of variation. The second section features various chromaticism, while the A' section showcases octaves and descending marches in the right hand, accompanied by octaves and chords in the left hand. Additionally, in section A', we identify the highest sound, the A2 sound. The left hand typically exhibits ascending arpeggios that correspond to the harmony played by the right hand.

This prelude, characterized by left-hand arpeggios and an improvisatory approach, epitomizes euphoria and eroticism theme. This is evidenced by the persistent arpeggios in the left hand.



Fig. 1. A. Scriabin – „Prelude in C Major, op. 11, no. 1,” m. 13-16

3.2. Prelude in G Major, op. 11, No. 3

The prelude in G Major, No. 3 from Op. 11 is one of the most Chopinesque, resembling Chopin's G Major Prelude.



Fig. 2. A. Scriabin – „Prelude in G Major, op. 11, no. 3”, m. 1-3

This prelude is segmented into three principal sections: A, A', and A'', the last one functioning as a coda. Section one comprises two phrases, each consisting of two motifs. The initial reason features a 'question' character and includes both a rising and a stationary cell (see to the sample below).



Fig. 3. A. Scriabin – „Prelude in G Major, op. 11, no. 3”, m. 1-2

The second motif has a "response" character, featuring a descending and sinusoidal element.



Fig. 4. A. Scriabin – „Prelude in G Major, op. 11, no. 3,” m. 3-4

Section two comprises two sentences that differ in length from the initial two sentences in section one. This section serves as a transition to the third segment, which is the most chaotic part of this prelude. The initial theme (measures 17-20) is identical to the first motif in section one. The second motive of this section resembles the second motive of the preceding section, albeit transposed to the subdominant, C Major.

The harmonic progression in this passage is evident: it modulates from G to C (measures 21-28), transitions to E minor (measures 28-30), proceeds to A minor (measures 31-32), and then resolves to G major (measures 32-36). The third portion consists of two phrases, however it remains in the fundamental key of G Major. The current section, commencing at measure 37, functions as both a reprise and a coda. From bar 37, the initial two motifs are reiterated identically, followed by a prolonged sustained note lasting five bars and two overlapping short chords. The initial chord is an atypical fourth chord (A-D-G-C), succeeded by a chord on the tonic, G Major.

The right-hand melody mostly comprises ascending and descending sequences that create various harmonies. The left-hand melody features arpeggios consistently throughout this prelude, along with significant leaps of seventh, octave, or even tenth, which are primarily characteristic of Scriabin's compositions.

The rhythm is notably challenging. Polyrhythms, characteristic of Scriabin, would be rather easy to perform if the prelude had not been prepared with the tempo indicator *Vivo*.

The texture is homophonic, specifically characterized by a melody accompanied by harmony. To the right are several melodic lines that require emphasis. The right hand contains the *marcato* indication, which compels the player to emphasize the melodic lines present. The left hand's accompaniment is founded on arpeggios.

3.3. Prelude in e minor, Op. 11, No. 4

Despite the presence of several dissonances, tonal harmonic resolutions persist in this Prelude; for instance, in the opening measure, the right-hand plays B-sharp on beat four, which resolves to B-E in the subsequent measure. In measure 2, on beats five and six, the dominant of the dominant (e-a#-d and e-a#-c#) is present, which resolves quickly in the subsequent measure to e-b. In measure eight, there are dominant chains that resolve to the tonic in the subsequent measure. Typically, dominant chords are accompanied by an additional seventh or even a ninth chord. Bars 19-23 include a dominant-tonic progression in each measure.



Fig. 5. A. Scriabin – “Prelude in E minor, op. 11, no. 4”, m. 1-3

The initial section comprises 8 measures, constituting only one period. This period comprises two phrases of four bars each. The initial four measures, which encapsulate motif *a*, have a steady chromatic descent in the left hand, commencing at the A note in the first octave and dropping to F# in the lower octave, subsequently ascending back to F#1 in the higher octave. This motif will recur

throughout the whole prelude, like a leitmotif. The right hand performs the accompaniment, linking a sequence of chords for four measures to create a rhythmic-melodic ostinato.

These chords create inner lines among themselves, however, remain in the background due to the prominence of the left hand, which carries the principal melodic line. The two sound planes replicate identically, but at the conclusion of the repetition, there is a harmonic alteration that sets up motive b of the initial section. In the subsequent four bars (measures 5-8), the musical conversation intensifies. Both the left and right hands exhibit a succession of sequences, culminating in a climax and thereafter resolving into a genuine V-I cadence.

From a structural perspective, the left-hand exhibits two motivic cells: the first comprises three eighths notes and a dotted quarter, over which a second voice, a fourth, is layered, while the second cell consists of a quarter note and a dotted quarter note. The two cells remain identical until measure 7, at which point the left transitions from eighths and fourths to dots and dotted eighths in each measure. On the right side, we also possess chord sequences till the conclusion of section one. Additionally, due to the chords, the right hand must navigate multiple lines that require guidance. From measure 7 to the end of the first section, the right-hand is of more interest, thanks to left-hand which is static. The right-hand has chords on each beat (being made up of fourths).



Fig. 6. A. Scriabin – „Prelude in E minor, op. 11, no. 4,“ m. 8

The second section is an A' and has eight bars (measures 9-16). The initial section contains repetitions, with variations emerging at measure 15. Rather than the V-I cadence, an augmented seventh chord is present in 3rd progression (g#-b-d-f), which resolves to d-f-a, and then to f-a-c. These changes serve to create suspense, emerging as unexpected elements within the musical discourse. The auditory arrangement continues unchanged: the left consists of eighths, fourths, and fifths, while the right features chords.

The final section is a B, or coda, of eight measures (17-24). The musical

discourse diminishes, the tonal chains become evident, and rhythmically, there will increasingly be elongated notes, dotted rhythms, or rests. The construction of the third section differs from the first and second motives, with the former comprising three measures and the latter five measures. The left-hand melody predominantly descends in a chromatic manner. It is located in the initial two parts. In the initial two measures, the notes G, F#, D, and C# are visibly longer than the other notes in the melody. In bar 8, a prolonged B note serves as the root, accompanied by a series of dominant chords. In measures 18-23, the B note appears in each measure, occasionally positioned to the left and at other times to the right, with this sound accentuated until the penultimate bar.

The rhythm predominantly consists of eighth and quarter notes, with a rhythmic amplification occurring at the conclusion. Measures 17 to 23 contain dotted notes, fourths associated with dotted notes, and pauses, which serve to split the musical discourse. The eighth notes manifest in quarter note movement until the third section, creating a rhythmic and melodic ostinato.

The texture is homophonic, including a melody line on the left accompanied by harmony on the right. Conversely, as previously stated, the right hand also features specific melodic lines inside the chords, which may be regarded as a counter melody.

The dynamics primarily consist of *mp*, *p*, and *pp*. We occasionally observe a *crescendo*, but its duration is brief. The sole *mf* in this prelude appears in bar 8, signifying a lyrical, introspective, and subdued quality of the composition.

The agogic is likewise associated with this subdued, introverted quality, exemplified by the *Lento* indication.

The repetitive ostinato of this prelude evokes the notion of enchantment. The sinking melodies of the left hand represent the descent into hell, while the prolonged notes of the right hand establish a lyrical, repetitive ambiance. This prelude can be categorized as erotic symbolism. The rubato technique is employed in this prelude independently and is not specified in the score. The descending semitones contribute to this connotation. The elongated quarter notes or dotted eighth notes indicate the segmentation of the musical discourse and evoke a sense of suspense.

4. Conclusions

Scriabin, like to several Russian composers of his era, was undeniably affected by Chopin. As a young composer, created works in same genres as Chopin. This analysis demonstrates that Scriabin's Preludes, Op. 11, have numerous

characteristics akin to Chopin's Preludes, Op. 28. Both composers saw the prelude as a distinct genre. Additionally, both Op. 28 and Op. 11 comprise a variety of styles and forms, including the nocturne, waltz, and notably the *étude*. Scriabin frequently utilizes conventional formal structures, including ternary or binary forms, composed of standard four-bar phrase units. His harmonic language occasionally exhibits Chopinesque tendencies, exemplified by the II7 - I cadential development, establishing a notable link between their compositional methodologies.

The contrasting styles, and disjunctions in Scriabin's music create a complex of fragmented scenes, seemingly lacking a smoother progression in their narrative structure. However, unifying elements such as tonality, and the overall structures, all interconnect to establish a cohesive narrative flow. This quality of musical and expressive fragmentation is designed to intrigue listeners and captivate their boundless imagination. By performing Scriabin's piano music from a narrative perspective, pianists can offer a fresh understanding of his works, elevating the audience's musical experience to a new level.

Performing Scriabin's Op. 11 Preludes poses significant technical and creative obstacles. These preludes mirror Chopin's technique in specific elements, including nocturne-inspired accompaniments, elaborate melodic lines in the right hand, meticulously constructed inner voices, and a technical methodology reminiscent of an *étude*. Simultaneously, Scriabin's preludes demonstrate unique technical peculiarities.

A significant characteristic is the intricacy of the left-hand technique, demonstrating Scriabin's adeptness in navigating challenging sections. The left hand frequently executes broken chords and arpeggios extending beyond two octaves at rapid tempos. To prevent mistakes, performers should practice the left hand in isolation, accurately assess intervals, and examine each position with precision. The right hand necessitates a significant degree of technical proficiency, especially in performing expressive melodies and complex passages.

On an interpretative level, controlling tempo, particularly in reprises or conclusions, introduces an additional element of complexity. In ternary-form preludes, the reprise frequently features octave doublings, pronounced dynamic markings, and several *accelerandi* to create a heroic conclusion.

Pedaling presents a considerable difficulty in Scriabin's compositions owing to the intricate harmonic and rhythmic treatment in each hand. Although clarity is occasionally necessary for sustaining harmonic accuracy, Scriabin's exotic sonorities and enigmatic chord transitions frequently advantage from more nuanced or gradual pedal alterations, circumventing sudden changes to maintain the desired ambiance.

This essay reflects concerns over the selected issue of synthesis, as well as a prospective study direction.

5. References

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