

# ***With Scriabin at the Piano***

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*Q. Scriabin was a one-off, a special case. There's never been a composer quite like him. His was a master pianist, but how much of this mastery is evident in the music he wrote?*

KUERTI. And the writing is wildly original. Obviously, his early work owes a lot to Chopin, but even here the dizzying leaps, the relentless energy and the Slavic grandeur give it an entirely distinct flavor. It shares the bravura of Liszt, but Scriabin's bravura is more sophisticated than a lot of Liszt's pyrotechnics. Starting from the Fourth Piano Sonata – and more especially the Fifth – he wreaks a profound change to the very essence of piano music, to the same degree that Liszt did a half a century earlier and that Debussy was doing about the same time as Scriabin. But, for me, Scriabin was more analogous to James Joyce, his junior by 10 years; Joyce hammered out his own invented words, while Scriabin invented new musical words. Sprays of esoteric arpeggios, puffs of musical smoke, tantalizingly eccentric rhythms, shivering, obsessive trills, jack-hammered chord accompaniments, cavalcades of flying chords, all imbued with his very personal, nearly toxic harmonic colours – these changed the face of piano writing forever. I can think of only two other important composers who changed their style quite as radically as Scriabin did – Schoenberg and Fauré.

*Q. To what extent is he a pianistic voluptuary?*

KUERTI. Early on, much of his music has a sensuous, often over-sweet sheen to it, but you only need to read the running surtitles in his later works, especially the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh sonatas, to get a feel of their tortured and often tragic depths. 'With fantastic intoxication'; 'dizzy with fury'; 'with restrained warmth'; 'The dream takes shape'; 'clarity, sweetness, purity'; 'seductively'; 'winged, swirling'; 'The terror surges'; 'blossoming of the mysterious forces'; 'With a celestial voluptuousness' – but it's all refined and sublimated, as it should be in celestial circumstances!

*Q. What, if anything, do Scriabin's Etudes have to add to those of Chopin and Liszt?*

KUERTI. Where Chopin confined himself to thirds, sixths, and octaves, Scriabin's late Etudes contained fifths, sevenths, and ninths.

*Q. What are the main agents of structure in his music? Do his structures pose any particular challenges to the interpreter?*

KUERTI. The structures are often as inebriated as the character of the music, and that's not to disparage them – structure and content need to speak the same language. There are sudden cinematic flashbacks, and often two simultaneous stories interrupting each other, indeed, often with different tempi. One needs to participate boldly in these schizophrenic reversals, changing mood, dynamics, tempo and colour as suddenly as Marcel Marceau's famous mime skit with the masks of tragedy and comedy.

*Q. What are the chief characteristics of pedaling in Scriabin?*

KUERTI. In the Seventh Sonata he seems to have made a resolution to provide precise markings, but after just two pages they become very sporadic. It's clear from the context, and from those few marking he actually does give, that a great deal of pedal is needed, but it needs to be much too subtle and dependent on the instrument and the acoustics to allow it to be prescribed in detail, as Chopin tried to do – unfortunately, to my mind.

*Q. Is a good knowledge of Scriabin's life a help to the interpreter?*

KUERTI. Knowing about his occult psychoses, his beliefs in theosophy and his delusions of grandeur (he was going to change the world, indeed end it, with his unfinished 'Prefatory Action' and his planned "Mysterium", to be performed in India in front of millions, with bells hung from clouds), knowing the extent of his manias should help stimulate the exotic extravagance needed to do justice to his works.