

## **Pro Reviews:** Poèmes (2) for piano, Op. 71

### **All Music Guide:**

Alexander Skryabin completed his 2 Poems, Op. 71 for solo piano in 1914. The composer had only one more year to live, during which he published nothing. Though his catalog is rife with egomaniacal works with a far-fetched, ecstatic quality that is gratingly self-involved, 1914 was a year of superb composition for the Russian mystic. His excessive persona, partially calculated and partially genuinely insane, had just enough connection to his real instincts to invest successfully in works of real merit. Many critics, because of lunacy, have dismissed Skryabin. This is a disservice to those who are interested in the early twentieth-century avant-garde, one of the most interesting eruptions of music history. Among the oddest qualities of the fine, late works of Skryabin is the bizarrely coincidental similarity the musical language has to that of early Alban Berg, particularly in the first poem of Op. 71, entitled "Fantastique." These works share a nocturnal warmth that is not heard anywhere else, except perhaps in passages from the works of Mahler and Schoenberg. Of course, Skryabin's Russian heritage is bound to point his interests toward France, which held sway over the higher cultural norms of Russia throughout the nineteenth century. There are hints of the early Debussy in to the second poem of Op. 71, entitled "En rêvant," a sort of clenched take on the French composer's first book of Image, overshadowing the Berg quality of the first poem. Throughout both poems the most focused point of departure is Chopin. The delicacy and intimacy that Skryabin generates is comparable to Chopin's, and the sometimes cloying, non-infectious rapture that pervades much of his early work is absent. In fact, this particular work is an important find for those interested in knowing what the Russian composer was actually capable of. A sort of calm reverence pervades this brief score, which is slightly more than four minutes in duration. It is grown-up music, not attempting to further an unhelpful persona that was fueling the composer's self-destructive tendencies. At the same time, it is not confessional art either; there is no sense of offering a melodramatic glimpse into a precious, private personality. Op. 71 sounds like the fine product of a highly original, cosmopolitan composer. The catch is that perhaps if he did not exude the messianic pretensions that he did, this music would have probably been absorbed by the slumlords of the almost-avant-garde ghetto. While this music is beautiful, its focus is on a harmonic revolution, one that had already taken place in Vienna. As for the stunning atmospheres he creates, that had been handily done already in Paris. Skryabin's loss of deeper significance comes from his comparative lack of contact with Middle and Western European composers. If he had been among them during his formative years, it seems likely that he would have risen to fame in proximity of his expatriated fellow countryman, Stravinsky. Nonetheless, 2 Poems, Op. 71 seems to sum up the piano music of his time.

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