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Kenneth Peacock

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**Synesthetic Perception:
Alexander Scriabin's Color Hearing**

KENNETH PEACOCK
Eastern Connecticut State University

Scriabin's decision to orchestrate his fifth symphony *Prometheus* with a "counterpoint of light" resulted from his perception of sound as literal color. This phenomenon is known as synesthesia, and by the early decades of this century, well over 100 specialized case studies had appeared in the experimental literature.

The present article is in two parts. The first is a general discussion of the vast literature on synesthesia. With this perspective, Scriabin's color hearing can be understood to have resulted from a typical synesthetic pairing of diverse sensory stimuli. In part two, the composer's personal perception is examined, and an analysis of the *Tastiera per luce* in the orchestral score is presented. This part for colored light serves a dual function by indicating particular colors to be projected during performance as well as all transposition levels of the six-note pitch collection employed exclusively in the composition.

ONE evening after a rehearsal in 1907, Scriabin, Rimsky-Korsakov and Rachmaninov met at the *Café de la Paix* near the Grand Opera in Paris. They talked about the connection between colors and keys—an idea that was unknown to Rachmaninov. Rimsky-Korsakov claimed that the predominance of D major ("the color of gold") in the cellar scene of Rachmaninov's *The Miserly Knight* proved that the latter was sensitive to color in sound (Engle, 1915-1916).

Although there is no evidence that Rachmaninov developed his newly discovered color sense, Rimsky-Korsakov is known to have perceived a relationship between specific colors and tonalities as early as 1867. Scriabin believed integration of colored light within a symphonic work would act as "a powerful psychological resonator for the listener," and this belief in correspondence between stimuli was implemented in his color-symphony

Requests for reprints may be sent to Kenneth Peacock, Department of Music, Shafer Hall, Eastern Connecticut State University, Windham, CT 06226.

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Abstract

Scriabin's decision to orchestrate his fifth symphony "Prometheus" with a "counterpoint of light" resulted from his perception of sound as literal color. This phenomenon is known as synesthesia, and by the early

decades of this century, well over 100 specialized case studies had appeared in the experimental literature. The present article is in two parts. The first is a general discussion of the vast literature on synesthesia. With this perspective, Scriabin's color hearing can be understood to have resulted from a typical synesthetic pairing of diverse sensory stimuli. In part two, the composer's personal perception is examined, and an analysis of the "Tastiera per luce" in the orchestral score is presented. This part for colored light serves a dual function by indicating particular colors to be projected during performance as well as all transposition levels of the six-note pitch collection employed exclusively in the composition.

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