

Peter Sabbagh

The development of harmony in Scriabin's works

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Last but not least, I thank my parents enabling my education, I dedicate this study to them.

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Introduction

The development.....

How does something new begin? It arises from the old. The aspect I am most interested in is the gradual development of this process.

Development is a dynamic process, by changing the original form something new arises. Change does not mean that the old is completely replaced by something new, it rather means that some of the old elements are maintained, others are varied by intensifying them, for example.

To understand a certain development one has to understand, on the one hand, in what way the elements of the old are changed, varied or intensified, and, on the other hand, one has to realize what has been maintained.

...of harmony...

Harmony is the central factor in Scriabin's musical thinking. From harmony everything else is developed. It defines the form and in his later works even the melody is determined by the harmony.

*"Harmony becomes melody and melody becomes harmony. For me there is no difference between melody and harmony."*¹

When Scriabin says, "harmony becomes melody", he means that harmonies are unfolded to melodies by letting the notes of the chords sound one after the other. With "melody becomes harmony" he does not mean the reverse process, using the notes of a melody simultaneously as a harmonic chord. It rather means that his melodic ideas are fitted into harmonies, that means, to achieve a certain harmonic effect he even changes slightly the previous meaning of his melodies. That shows that harmony fundamentally determines Scriabin's way of thinking.

...in Scriabin's works

The motivation for me to study the development in Scriabin's works is that tendencies which can already be found with other composers, theorists, or in the tradition, are pushed ahead.

¹ Leonid Sabaneev, *Vospominanija o Skrjabinu*, Moskau 1925, page. 47. Quoted in: *Musik-Konzepte 32/33, Aleksandr Skrjabin und die Skrjabinisten*, edited by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn, edition text + kritik, 1983, page 8 (translation)

Certainly, this process is not straightforward, aiming at a certain end, although one could get that impression when reading Scriabin's remarks: "*I am just working on a new style, and what a pleasure, I can see a lot of progress.*"² Working on a new style is not a straightforward process, but includes experimenting, trying out different possibilities. Some of them are developed, some turn out to be dead ends.

Scriabin again and again tries out new ways, some of them prove to be dead ends, others seem to be dead ends at first sight, but turn out to be very productive and pointing to the future after other developments have reached a certain stage. But there are some very clear lines of development that can be traced in Scriabin's works.

A clear statement about Scriabin's way of composing can, of course, not be made, because the process of composing is alternating between intuition and calculation.

What is "intuition" and what is "calculation"? Referring to Sabaneev's theory that the "Prometheus Chord" is formed by the overtone-row, Scriabin, for example, says:

*"I find my chords and harmonies by intuition, and may acoustic scientists teach whatever they want. It pleases me when scientific facts coincide with my intuition, and, in the end, that cannot be avoided. Intuition has always been my priority. Of course, the principle of unity demands that science and intuition coincide."*³

In another passage Scriabin says:

*"I always think that mathematics has to play a big role in music. Sometimes I even do calculations when composing, calculations of the form."*⁴

To understand Scriabin's way of thinking one can try to find recurring structures in his works, structures originating in the tradition that have been changed by Scriabin in his unmistakable manner.

The aim of my study is to describe these structures and their changes, tracing them back to a possible model of thinking. The recurrence of these structures in Scriabin's works enables us to analyse and understand Scriabin's comprehensive development.

Moreover, comprehensive, historical developments can be shown. One can trace some lines of development to other composers connected with Scriabin, with composers whose ideas had been developed by Scriabin as well as with composers who continued Scriabin's development.

² About Poème de l'Extase in a letter to Tatjana Fedorovna Schloezer 1904 from Paris quoted in: Musik-Konzepte 32/33, Aleksandr Skrjabin und die Skrjabinisten, p. 6 (translation)

³ Leonid Sabaneev, Vospominanija o Skrjabině, Moskva 1925, p. 64. quoted in: Musik-Konzepte 32/33, p. 8 (translation)

⁴ Sabaneev p. 270 / Musik-Konzepte 32/33, p. 9 (translation)

Problems being discussed

In the history of music, developments concerning the musical thinking occur in the various periods at different speeds. Comparing, for example, the periods of 1520 to 1590 and 1755 to 1825, both are periods of 70 years, one can say that during the first period the musical material and its use hardly changed, while during the second period a rapid development took place.

There are only 31 years between Scriabin's first work in 1883, a canon in "D-minor", written when he was 12 years old, and his last works, *Poèmes* and *Préludes* in 1914. In that comparably short period of time he made a breathtaking development. Scriabin's early works are definitely still in the romantic tradition. On the other hand, his later works are far-reaching into the 20th century.

As Scriabin's development is consequent, without any intermission, he connects the music of the 19th and 20th centuries. When understanding Scriabin's development, we also realize that some composers of the 20th century, Olivier Messiaen, for example, are connected with the tradition, by taking up and developing Scriabin's ideas.

The central questions in my study are:

Which elements in Scriabin's harmony are new, and which have been derived from the tradition?

Is the development in Scriabin's works consequent, once started, did it have to follow a certain course?

Is there something elemental in Scriabin's thinking that pushes ahead this development?

Procedure

The harmonic thinking is dominated by verticalization, much more than the melodic thinking, that means, harmony is above all determined by chords. By a harmonic analysis one tries to understand the main principles of the structures of the chords, relating the chords to a key note.

Harmony does not only have a vertical perspective, but also a horizontal one. There are two important aspects:

1. Chord connections, that means, questions of voice leading, for example the resolution of dissonances.
2. Tonal progression. This horizontal aspect has mostly been neglected in all works on Scriabin's harmony. But for the understanding of a harmony this horizontal aspect is at least as important as the description of the structures of the chords. The question of the chord progression is of fundamental importance to understand harmonic processes, that means, the question, if there is a connection between the key notes of the chords, that is to say, if there exists an all-prevailing system of progression in which the key notes of the chords move.

By the arrangement of the chords, according to a certain system of tonal progression, new tone systems are created, the basis for the formation of keys, scales or modi.

There are three parts in this study. Each of these parts deals with one of the three pillars of harmonic thinking.

In the first part I analyse the structures of the harmonies, in the second I examine the tonal progressions, and in the third part I deal with the tone systems.

This study also deals with the correlations among these three basic pillars.

“Prometheus” op. 60, is a very important and central work of Scriabin’s, because it is the first work in which he leaves the major-minor-tonality. Therefore, the first two parts of my study are each subdivided into another two parts: The development till “Prometheus”, that is to say till leaving the traditional major-minor-tonality, and the development after this work.

The basis of my examinations are, besides Scriabin’s notes, also statements and remarks in Scriabin’s letters⁵ and in “Memories of Scriabin”⁶ by Leonid Sabaneev, a close friend of the composer.

Moreover, regarding the structure of the chords, I use a work by Gottfried Eberle in which he traces back the historical genesis of the “Prometheus Chord”.⁷

New in my study is the examination of the all-prevailing system of progression and the description of the historical roots of this system. New is also the description of the connections among the three basic pillars of harmony, and the examination of the question: What consequences do the changes of one of the basic pillars have on the other two? Also new is the question of the driving force behind this development.

Scriabin’s harmony in the musical research

Roughly speaking, there are three ways of approach to Scriabin’s harmony. One tries to derive Scriabin’s harmony from the tradition, the other one, regarding his later works, tries to anticipate the music to come, and a third way tries to consider both aspects.

Each of these ways depends on which part of Scriabin’s entire work one wants to concentrate.

⁵ A. Skrjabin, *Pis’ma (Letters)*; edited by A.V. Kasperov, Moskau 1965, quoted in: *Musik -Konzepte 32/33*, Aleksandr Skrjabin und die Skrjabinisten, edited by Heinz-Klaus Metzger und Rainer Riehn, edition text + kritik, 1983 p. 5 ff.

⁶ Leonid Sabaneev, *Vospominanija o Skrjabinu Moskau 1925*, quoted in *Musik -Konzepte 32/33 a.a.O.*, p. 8 ff.,

⁷ Gottfried Eberle, *Zwischen Tonalität und Atonalität, Studien zur Harmonik Alexander Skrjamins*, Musikverlag Emil Katzwichler, München-Salzburg 1978

Scriabin's work is divided into three periods, his early, his middle, and his late works. In 1921 Boris de Schloezer, Scriabin's brother in law, was the first one using this division in an essay in "Revue Musicale".⁸ His early works include his works up to op.29, his 2nd Symphony, the middle period starts with his 4th Piano Sonata op. 30 and includes all his works up to "Prometheus" op. 60, which is regarded as the first of his later works.

The Soviet musical research concentrated on Scriabin's early and middle works. Mostly the scientists came to the conclusion that Scriabin had never left tonality, he only came to the border of atonality.⁹ This point of view is probably influenced by their ideology, because modernism was rejected, being influenced by the "reactionary, idealistic philosophy [...] of bourgeois culture, [...] poisoning conviction", as L. Danilevic says.¹⁰ Olga Sachaltjeva, for instance, sees the harmonies in Scriabin's later works as "secondary dominants without a tonic".¹¹

Vera P. Dernova¹² develops a theory of Boleslav L. Javorskij, a student of Taneev's. As the center of a system Boleslav L. Javorskij regards the ambiguity of the resolution of the tritone. The tritone resolves to a sixth or, when regarding it as the enharmonic equivalent, a diminished fifth, to a third. Taking both forms of resolution simultaneously would result in a "double system" or double keys".

Dernova started from two dominants: Da and Db that stand in the tritone-distance. Ta and Tb are the tonics belonging to them. But in Scriabin's later works these tonics no longer exist. Dernova regards Scriabin as the first composer exclusively using double keys in his later works.

There are many works on the "Prometheus-Chord". Carl Dahlhaus regards the origin of the "Prometheus-Chord", according to the history of harmony, as the chord of the dominant ninth, with a suspension of leading tone-character to the fifth, or low-altered fifth, and the sixth as a non-harmonic addition.¹³

⁸ Boris de Schloezer, Alexandre Scriabine, in: *Revue Musicale*, 2, 1921, Nr. 9, p. 27 ff.

⁹ Gottfried Eberle, *Zwischen Tonalität und Atonalität*, p. 8 ff.

¹⁰ L. Danilevic, A. N. Skrjabin, translated by Margarete Hoffmann, Leipzig 1954, p. 5. quoted in: G. Eberle

¹¹ Olga Sachaltjeva, *O garmonii Skrjabina*, Moskau 1965 quoted in: Eberle, p. 8

¹² Vera P. Dernova, *Skrjabins Einfluß auf das musiktheoretische Denken unseres Jahrhunderts*, translated by Doris Leitinger, in: *Alexander Skrjabin, Studien zur Wertungsforschung*, Bd. 13, edited by Otto Kolleritisch, Graz 1980, p. 142 ff.

¹³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Alexander Skrjabin. Aus der Vorgeschichte der atonalen Musik*, in: *Deutsche Universitätszeitung*, 1957, XII/21, p. 18 ff.

Manfred Kelkel¹⁴ regards the “Prometheus-Chord” as dominant thirteenth chord without fifth, consisting of key note, third, seventh, ninth, altered eleventh, and thirteenth. By the transposition of the structure of thirds into fourths the “Prometheus-Chord” is formed. In his three books Kelkel examines Scriabin’s biography and his philosophy of life, as well as his use of form and rhythm.

Peter Dickenmann¹⁵ examines only Scriabin’s works of the early and middle periods in his dissertation. He uses Ernst Kurth’s methods and develops them.

Also Clemens-Christoph Johannes von Gleich shows how the harmony of “Prometheus” is developed from the functional tonality. He divides Scriabin’s development, according to Rudolph Steiner’s theory, into 7-year-periods. (“Die Erziehung des Kindes vom Gesichtspunkt der Geisteswissenschaft”)

The approach of seeing Scriabin’s harmony as an anticipation of the music to come goes back to the mathematician and physicist Leonid Sabaneev. He deduces the harmony of “Prometheus” from the tones 8 – 14 (without the 12th) of the overtone row. At least Scriabin did not reject this theory, although he emphasized having found the tones by intuition.

Later a rather problematic point of view was developed from this theory, regarding Scriabin’s later works as a kind of anticipation of the serial technique. This theory explained the harmony not only by referring to the overtone row, but also by referring to an “undertone row”, for example Helga Boegner.¹⁶ Thus she explained Scriabin’s rootedness in the not yet tempered system of natural tones and his consensus with the “old harmonical symbolism”.

Significantly enough, this thesis was used by Karl Laux in 1958 to prove his criticism of Scriabin’s allegedly incomprehensible later works. “This chord is not a musical invention. It is a mathematical construction.”¹⁷

The problematic thing about this “overtone-theory” is that the partial tones of the natural-tone-row are not identical with the well-tempered tones of the piano. For instance, the 13th overtone of “C” is closer to the “A flat” than to the “A”. Moreover, “the interval-distance of the natural-tone-row [...], counting up to 20, includes everything from the octave to the quarter tone, (and) useful and useless musical tones. The natural-tone-row justifies everything, that means, nothing.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Manfred Kelkel, *Alexandre Scriabine. Sa vie, l’ésotérisme et le langage musical dans son œuvre*, Paris 1978
Bd. 3 p. 14

¹⁵ Peter Dickenmann, *Die Entwicklung der Harmonik bei A. Skrjabin*, Bern-Leipzig 1945

¹⁶ Helga Boegner, *Die Harmonik der späten Klavierwerke Skrjabin*, Diss. München, 1955

¹⁷ Karl Laux, *Die Musik in Rußland und in der Sowjetunion*, Berlin -Ost, 1958, p. 226

¹⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, *Struktur und Expression bei Alexander Skrjabin*, in: *Musik des Ostens*, 6, 1972, p. 229.

American authors see in Scriabin's music serial techniques. George Perle, for instance, calls Scriabin's technique of composition a "nondodecaphonic serial composition".¹⁹ John Everett Cheetham sees in Scriabin's technique a "quasi-serial technique", regarding "sets" as the basic materials for his composition.²⁰

Zofia Lissa combines two perspectives, the one putting Scriabin's harmony in the romantic tradition, and the other one putting Scriabin's anticipating forms into the centre of the examinations. She is the first one who realizes that the "Chopin Chord" is the historical root of the sixth in the "Prometheus Chord".²¹ She also realizes the fundamental importance of the position of the sixth, which is almost always on the top of the chord in Chopin's and Scriabin's works. In this way a seventh is formed of the seventh of the chord and thus the characteristic quartal chord-structure of Scriabin's later works is created.²² Chopin's style can, therefore, be regarded as a stepping-stone for Scriabin developing his own harmony. Moreover, she regards Scriabin's later works a "fore-form" of the twelve-tone technique".

For me Gottfried Eberle's work²³ is very important. He shows the historical genesis of the "Prometheus Chord" and traces its development till the occurrence of symmetrical basic scales, which Olivier Messiaen uses as a starting point for his musical language. Furthermore, he points out the common elements that can be found in the twelve-tone-technique, but also its differences. He also examines the correlation of harmony, melody, and polyphony. In an additional part he examines the relations between harmony and form.

The examination of an all-prevailing system of progression and its historical roots is not included in the considerations. Also the correlation of the three basic pillars of harmony and the question of the driving force behind this development is not treated.

¹⁹ George Perle, *Serial Composition and Atonality*, Berkeley 1963, p. 38

²⁰ John Everett Cheetham, *Quasi-serial techniques in the later piano works of Alexander Scriabin*, Washington 1969

²¹ In *Acta musicologica*, 1935, „Die geschichtliche Vorform der Zwölfknoten-Technik“, p. 15 ff.

²² Zofia Lissa, about the correlations of harmony in Scriabin's and Chopin's work, in : Zofia Lissa, *The Book of the First International Musicological Congress Devoted to the Works of Frédéric Chopin*, Warschau 1963, p. 335 ff.

²³ Gottfried Eberle, *Zwischen Tonalität und Atonalität, Studien zur Harmonik Alexander Scriabins* Musikverlag Emil Katzschler, München - Salzburg 1978

In the recent works on Scriabin the authors do not try to answer the question in general any more, if Scriabin's later works are tonal or atonal. Eberle's work is, significantly enough, called "Between Tonality and Atonality". Also Lothar Hoffmann-Erbrecht regards Scriabin's later style as a "floating (schwebende) tonality"²⁴

The terms "Klangzentrum" ("chord center"), "Prometheus Chord" and "Scriabin Chord"

Zofia Lissa was the first using the term "Klangzentrum" in connection with Scriabin.²⁵ For her it means that all chords in "Prometheus" are related to the first chord.

The term "Klangzentrum" goes back to Hermann Erpf.²⁶ He defines this term, when regarding Schönberg's orchestral work "Farben", op.16 Nr.3, as a sound determined by its structure of intervals, its position in the whole scope of pitch-levels, and its sound color. This sound is repeated again and again after short, contrasting inserts. To this central sound small melodic supplements are added. After the center has been consolidated, some changes of the "Klangzentrum" are possible.

Zofia Lissa states that for her the term "Klangzentrum" has a different meaning, because in Scriabin's works there are no contrasting inserts. There are not any additional melodic supplements either, the melody is determined by the "unfolding of harmony", as Scriabin calls it. She only uses this term to emphasize the vicinity to Schönberg.

As this definition only partially fits to Scriabin's way of thinking, in my study I use the term "Scriabin Chord" instead, because a certain chord, that is to say, the idea of a certain structure of intervals, is in the center of Scriabin's musical thinking. It does not change from work to work, but, regarding his whole work, we realize that there is a consistent development. This structure of intervals is treated in the same way as traditional chords, that is to say, there are inversions and a distinct relation to the key note. Moreover, this chord is one of the personal characteristics of Scriabin's music, and, therefore, I call it the "Scriabin Chord". In a way it can be compared with the "Chopin Chord", except that it was not Chopin's invention, but was also used by composers, such as Liszt or Brahms. There are even comparable passages in Bach's works, which is to be proved later. Frequently, the term "Prometheus Chord" is used for the chord I call "Scriabin-Chord". But the first chord of "Prometheus" is only one of different forms of one structural *idea*, which also is to be explained later. I am of the opinion that the other forms are not

²⁴ Bericht über den Internationalen musikwissenschaftlichen Kongreß Bonn 1970, p. 438 ff.

²⁵ Zofia Lissa, Geschichtliche Vorform der Zwölftontechnik, Acta musicologica, 1935, p. 15 ff.

²⁶ Hermann Erpf, Studien zur Harmonie und Klangtechnik der Neuen Musik, Wiesbaden 1927, p. 122 f

alterations of the first chord of "Prometheus", but other realizations of the same structural idea.

Therefore, in my study I regard the "Scriabin Chord" as a chord-structure, and the "Prometheus Chord" as one certain form of this structure, that has become known as the first chord of Scriabin's orchestral work "Prometheus".

PART ONE

The Structure of Chords

1. The development till “Prometheus”

There are three lines of development:

A. The compression of the different dominant forms

Examining Scriabin’s harmonic development the term “compression” seems to be the right one, because the “Scriabin Chord” in his different forms up to the sketches to “Acte préalable” as well as the symmetrical basic scales are, as is to be explained later, the result of the superimposition to simultaneity of different components, having at least one common element.

For Sigmund Freud ²⁷ the term “compression” had a specific meaning in his interpretation of dreams, that is to say, that several thoughts of a dream are compressed to the formation of a dream situation. For this process one or more common elements are necessary. In the process of dreaming these common elements are superimposed and coincide exactly. Examples of the result of such a process of compression are creatures consisting of different parts of many beings, like figures in a fable or a tale.

Scriabin’s early works adapt the romantic tradition. Scriabin’s style is influenced by idols like Chopin, for example. Of course, he uses the usual dominant forms:

D^7 , $D_7^{9(b)}$, $D^{6(b)}$, $D_{\frac{7}{5}}$.

At first sight this is nothing extraordinary, but it is the starting-point of Scriabin’s further development.

Scriabin also uses the “Chopin Chord”. One could regard the “Chopin Chord” as a kind of superimposition or compression of D^7 and D^6 .

The image shows a musical score in 6/8 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first measure shows a D6 chord (F, A, B, D) in the treble and a D7 chord (F, A, B, D, F) in the bass. The second measure shows the same D6 chord in the treble and a D7 chord in the bass. The third measure shows the same D6 chord in the treble and a D7 chord in the bass. Below the first two measures, there is a diagram: D^6 + D^7 =. Below the first two measures, there are two 'X' marks, one under the first measure and one under the second measure.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Über Träume und Traumdeutungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1971, p. 22 ff.

A musical score snippet in 6/8 time, key of B-flat major. The right hand plays a melodic line with eighth notes. The left hand plays a bass line with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note. A chord is marked with a '7' and 'D⁶' above it, and an 'X' below it.

From: Scriabin op. 4

The “Chopin Chord” is a fore-form in which the process of compression leading Scriabin to the “Scriabin Chord” is already implied, because also the “Scriabin Chord” is a superimposition or compression of different dominant forms. In addition to the “Chopin Chord” there are many different other chords in Scriabin’s early works which can be regarded as the results of compression of dominants. In this respect, they can also be seen as fore-forms of the “Scriabin Chord”.

A musical score snippet in 3/4 time, key of D major. The right hand features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. The left hand plays a complex chord structure. A chord is marked with a '9^b', '7', and '4<' below it, enclosed in a box.

Mazurka op. 3 No. 1, bars 18-21

$(D_{7}^{6-5})_{3} Dp$

$(D_{6-5}^{97}) Sp$

Mazurka op. 3 No. 1 bars 56-72

D_{6-5}^7

Mazurka op. 3 No. 1 bars 105-106

The dominants appear, depending on the tonic, as a major or minor sixth. (see above)

(D_7^9)

D_7^{9b}

tP

Mazurka op. 3 No. 3, bars 17-19

In the dominant forms there are the major as well as the minor ninth. The dominant form, in which we find the sixth and the raised fourth, is possibly formed by surrounding the fifth as an ornamental variation, which in this form is solidified to simultaneousness.

$D_6^{9-4<-5}$

t

Mazurka op. 3 No. 4, bars 94-102

In bar 96 there are already all tones of the “Scriabin Chord”, that is to say, the raised fourth, sixth, seventh and ninth, although the raised fourth and the sixth are here surrounding the fifth, that is to say, as alternatives. The process of compression has not yet come to the simultaneousness.

Already in his early works Scriabin sometimes notates the form of the dominant $D_{5>}^7$ as $D_{4<}^7$ which can be traced till the beginning of his later works. On the one hand, he notates, for example, in the Mazurka, op. 3 No. 1 bar 20 (see above) the raised fourth. On the other hand, in "Feuillet d'Album", op. 58 in bar 1 it is notated as a low-altered fifth:

Con delicatezza Op. 58

9
7
6
5>

4<

[5]

9
7
6
5>

4<

Feuillet d 'Album op. 58, bars 1-8

Therefore, there are several developments leading to the raised fourth in the "Scriabin Chord".

1. There is the usual, enharmonically identical form of the low-altered fifth.
2. There is the solidified surrounding of the fifth by the sixth and the raised fourth.
3. And finally, by the expansion of the tertian texture, the raised fourth is formed as thirteenth, which will be explained later.

The “Scriabin Chord” is a compression of all the dominant forms mentioned above:

$D7$ $+6$ $+9$ $4<$

The “Scriabin Chord” consists of the following notes:

D
 $\begin{matrix} 9(b) \\ 7 \\ 6(b) \\ 4< \end{matrix}$

The accidentals between the brackets mean that the notes major/minor sixth, respectively major/minor ninth are used alternatively and not simultaneously, as in the dominant forms, which the notes come from.

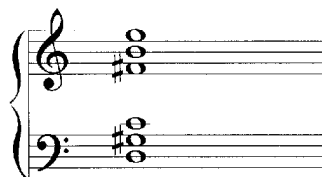
An indication that the “Scriabin Chord” has its origin in different dominant forms is that at first it is used as a dominant in a functional context:

\mathbb{D} D T

Prelude op. 37 No. 2²⁸

²⁸ quoted in: G. Eberle a.a.O., p. 17

Certainly, this chord expands more and more and is gradually losing its dominant character. Characteristic structures of intervals of the dominant are transferred to other functions, for example, $\text{II}^{\flat 7}$ (enharmonically identical with $\text{V}^{\flat 7}_{5^{\flat}}$). These chords, consisting mostly of six notes, are not always used in their complete forms, but they can also be present in segments, analogous to forms of the preceding dominant forms without the root or without the fifth.



“Desir“ op. 57 No. 1, bar 1

Or in another form:



This is a dominant form with a minor sixth and a minor ninth. The Prelude op. 27 No. 1 starts with a segment of this chord:

Patetico $\text{♩} = 92$ Op. 27 Nr. 1

The image shows the first two bars of Scriabin's Prelude, Op. 27 No. 1. The music is in 3/8 time and marked 'Patetico' with a tempo of quarter note = 92. The first bar contains a chord that is highlighted with a box. The dynamic marking is *mf*.

Prelude op. 27 No. 1, bars 1-2

This chord sounds like the “Tristan Chord”, in this example notated as a dominant without the root with a minor sixth and a minor ninth. (We know that Scriabin most appreciated the “Liebestrank-Motif” of “Tristan und Isolde”, besides “Feuerzauber” and the “Schwert-Motif” by Richard Wagner.²⁹) I am going to describe this line of development from the “Tristan Chord” via a dominant form to the “Scriabin Chord” on page 106 ff. The first complete “Scriabin Chords” can already be found in the 4th Piano Sonata, op. 30:

The image shows bars 7-8 of the second movement of Scriabin's 4th Piano Sonata, Op. 30. The music is in 3/8 time. The first bar contains a chord highlighted with a box. The dynamic markings are *mp*, *dim.*, and *pp*.

4th Piano Sonata op. 30, 2nd movement, bars 7-8

The image shows bar 150 of the second movement of Scriabin's 4th Piano Sonata, Op. 30. The music is in 3/8 time. The first bar contains a chord highlighted with a box. The dynamic marking is *pp*.

4th Piano Sonata op. 30 2nd movement, bars 150

²⁹ Sigfried Schibli, Alexander Skrjabin und seine Musik, Grenzüberschreitungen eines prometheischen Geistes, Piper-Verlag, München 1983, p. 178

As the “Scriabin Chord” has been formed by the compression of different dominant forms, that is to say, D^7 , D_7^9 , respectively, $D_7^{9>}$, D^6 , respectively, $D^{6>}$ and $D_7^{5>}$, respectively, $D_7^{4<}$, consequently, there are also different possibilities to superimpose and condense these different dominant forms and to compress them to a chord consisting of six notes.

The first chord in “Prometheus” is only one possibility of that compression, there are more of them. For example, at the beginning of “Poème fantasque”, op. 45 No. 2:



$$G \begin{matrix} 9 \\ 7 \\ 5 < \\ 5 > \end{matrix}$$

Poème fantasque op. 45 No. 2 bar 1

One could ask now, if the sixth in the “Prometheus Chord” is the result of various developments, too. Besides its origin in the “Chopin Chord”, it could also be the result of an extreme alteration of the fifth. In this example, op. 45 No. 2, the “D sharp” is a raised fifth. Scriabin himself talks of an alteration of the fifth:

*“I decided that the more higher tones there are in the harmony, it would turn out to be more radiant, sharper, and more brilliant. But it was necessary to organize the notes giving them a logical arrangement. Therefore, I took the usual thirteenth-chord, which is arranged in thirds. But it is not that important to accumulate high tones. To make it shining, conveying the idea of light, a greater number of tones had to be raised in the chord. And, therefore, I raise the tones: At first I take the shining major third, then I also raise the fifth (!) and the eleventh – thus forming my chord – which is raised completely and, therefore, really shining.”*³⁰

Considering that, the raised fifth occurred at first as an additional dissonant note, as an artificial leading note, as a returning note, or as a chromatic transition as can be seen in Mazurka op. 3 No. 4:

³⁰ Musik-Konzepte No. 32/33, a.a.O., p. 8 (translation)

57 *Con grazia* *rubato*

p *espr.*

X

Mazurka op. 3 No. 4 bars 57-61

Other examples are op.3, No.4, bar 29...

27

Mazurka op. 3 No. 4 bars 27 - 30

...or bar 112...

108

X

113

Mazurka op. 3 No. 4 bars 108 - 118