



Skryabin and the Piano

by Stuart Scott

Alexander Skryabin made a great reputation for himself as a concert pianist and he managed to do this during a golden age of pianism when Rachmaninov, Lhevinne and Hofmann were playing and the public were used to hearing such giants of the keyboard. This fact alone suggests that Skryabin was, from early in his career, a pianist of some calibre.

There is no shortage of comment by writers or musicians who knew Skryabin, worked with him or heard him play, attesting to his outstanding abilities as performer or composer. Indeed, Safonov who championed Skryabin and performed his orchestral music as often as he could, called him "a great pianist and a great composer", and Montague Nathan writing in 1917 maintained that he "showed exceptional talent as an executant," and that it was this that contributed to the establishment of his world wide reputation.

Skryabin never played any other composer's music after his conservatoire recitals and he was never without his critics whose bad reviews were based on their dislike or misunderstanding of his music as much as his piano technique. Critics who wrote enthusiastically about his recitals usually showed some insight into his work as a composer, but without doubt he had a highly personal style of playing which suited his own music admirably.

After his last piano recital given in Moscow in 1915, Grigori Prokofiev writing for the Russian Musical Gazette said, "What makes Skryabin's music ravishing is simply the enchantment of his performance. The tone is marvellous, despite a continuous sharpness, even clanging 'mezzo piano', but he achieves extraordinary effects. Don't forget he is a wizard with the pedal, though his ethereal sounds cannot quite fit the hall. He breaks the rhythmic flow and something new comes out each time. This suffuses the performance with freshness. Never has he played his Fourth Sonata with a more mastery or sincerity as he did yesterday. What power he put in the theme in the second movement! Yet the actual sound was not big. The secret is in the energetic rhythm".

The complaints of some other critics are apparently borne out by the only remaining record of his playing which are transcriptions of his performances from Welte-Mignon piano rolls, reissued on disc in recent years. Although they seem to confirm a nervous, erratic and arhythmical approach to performance, one must remember that the recordings were reconstructed by engineers through mechanical means and this is never more apparent than in the pedalling to be heard on these recordings. They only serve to show certain aspects of his approach in a purely clinical manner without having the means of combining these (mainly by Skryabin's individual use of the pedal) to form an overall sound picture. It must also be remembered that tempos could be affected by the

piano roll recording method and with so many variables, one cannot rely on the result as being totally representative of Skryabin's performance.

It is well known that Skryabin did not play a piece in the same way at each performance. He played according to mood declaring that "a piano composition is many faceted ... alive and breathes on its own. It is one thing today, and another tomorrow, like the sea. How awful it would be if the sea were the same every day and the same forever, like a movie film!" It is also well known that Skryabin's playing was extremely free as far as rhythm is concerned and there is still a Russian tradition in playing his music in a kind of 'sempre rubato', but there is of course, still the virtually unanswered question about his own approach. Skryabin did not use the direction 'rubato' in any of his manuscripts but maybe he assumed that pianists would approach his music in that style. Alternatively of course, rhythmical accuracy could have been a weakness in him as a performer, particularly as it is reported that he had played other composer's music with an unsteady rhythm. But Skryabin's music depends so much on rhythm for good effect that it is difficult to imagine a concert pianist of his time being able to get away with this and still cause so much interest and excitement whenever he played.

In 1916, a well respected piano teacher in Petrograd, N. N. Cherkass, published a book entitled, "Skryabin as Pianist and Piano Composer". Here he went to great lengths to point out, giving reasons, why he thought Skryabin was a bad pianist, but the book does contain a certain objectivity which is useful to the musicologist. However, even he seems to contradict himself on some points, particularly when criticizing Skryabin's pedal technique. He writes, "He [Skryabin] took his foot off the pedal only to put it down again but in rare instances played entirely without pedal." He maintains that had Skryabin been capable of a correct legato, he would not have overused the pedal. But later, when Cherkass speaks of harmonic control he says, "Skryabin had an amazing ability. His innate sensitivity to harmonic clarity kept him in linehe could separate voices clearly."

Skryabin would use the pedal to help create the desired effect for his compositions. The pedal was a necessity for his slow changing harmonies. The use of the pedal in his music is not always for a legato effect, but mostly for sustaining harmonies, and often, there are staccato notes played above a held sonority creating tonal balances and sustained effects not previously used by other composers. It is possible to think of him playing in a kind of very clear, transparent way to achieve an effect, but much of his music calls for a lot of sustained atmospheric sonorities.

It is clear from Skryabin's compositions that he was a master when it came to pedal techniques and tonal balance, and according to Cherkass and others, he played with great accuracy, placing him amongst the great virtuosos of his day. There is no doubt also, that he created a great impression on his audiences, his magnetism and wizardry causing Sabaneyev to describe his performances as "secret liturgical acts" where listeners felt "electric currents touching their psyche". During his performing career, Skryabin was looked upon as a magician of the keyboard, producing effects that no one else could ever hope for, even when performing his music sympathetically.

His reputation as a composer and a pianist went hand in hand and we should not perhaps try to evaluate Skryabin's piano technique when compared to other virtuosos who were performing music of quite different character, but it is interesting to note that his unique voice as a composer required a new technique from the performer. Skryabin knew how to create the desired effects in his own compositions quite naturally, but other performers had to learn new approaches when dealing with his music, and this took time. This might go towards explaining why Skryabin's own performances were always more successful than any of his contemporaries. The handful of other pianists, Hofmann

and Rachmaninov amongst them, who did use his music in recitals were not always successful, according to his critics and followers, in evoking that otherworldliness or ethereal atmosphere so necessary in any performance of his music.

When Skryabin died, Rachmaninov gave a series of recitals in memory of his friend but by all accounts Skryabin's friends were outraged at the presentation of his music. Prokofiev, who was present at one of the recitals (Nov.18th 1915) in which Rachmaninov played the fifth sonata, later noted that Skryabin's performances were immediately attractive and enticing with subtle shades of colour and rhythms which made the music fly and soar, whereas "with Rachmaninov all its notes stood firmly and clearly on the ground". Rachmaninov's playing was that of a nineteenth century virtuoso whose performances were always controlled and refined, technically brilliant with a good sense of form. In the Russian Music Gazette, Grigori Prokofiev wrote, "the audience was generous in its appreciation, though it distinctly sensed that something was wrong. Rachmaninov played with his usual technical perfection and the musical quality natural to him, but in his approach to Skryabin's works, he did not (or did not wish to) grasp the basic nature of his music – the unprecedented emotional saturation of Skryabin's creative power ... As if seeking a logic in Skryabin's harmonic structure, Rachmaninov artificially condensed the tempi. This showed the harmonic line with extraordinary clarity, but the vital spirit had gone! ... You should have seen the disappointment with which the admirers of Skryabin's later piano works looked at each other as they heard the innocuous and prosaic interpretation of the Satanic Poem, or the academically chilled treatment of the Second and Fifth Sonatas."

Hofmann's style too, was not entirely suited to Skryabin's music in that he was restrained from reading between the lines by his perfectionist approach, meticulously observing the printed page. Clearly, Skryabin had a new approach to pianism which was recognised by his teacher Safonov as early as 1888 when he remarked that, "Skryabin possessed in the highest degree what I always impressed on my students: the less like itself a piano is under the fingers of a player, the better it is".

Many recognised and appreciated this new approach to the piano including Eaglefield Hull who heard Skryabin perform at the Bechstein Hall, London in 1914. He wrote, "Everyone was struck by what appeared to be almost a new kind of pianism. His playing was so easy, so refined, quiet and unassuming, yet so beautifully ethereal in the softest passages, so rich and organ like in the mezzo parts, yet so satisfying in the fortissimo, and his pedal effects were quite magical in effect. It appeared as though this new music had brought along with it a new kind of playing". And so it did, because concertgoers had to review their understanding of piano music and pianism. No longer could one approach Skryabin's music as they might Chopin or Liszt's. New pedal effects were directly involved in producing new tone and colours, and there was little evidence to suggest that technical brilliance was exploited for its own sake.

As a presenter of his own works, sheer technical brilliance had no great attraction for Skryabin and he always regarded the creative side of his art as being more important than performance. That is not to say however, that he didn't see the significance of performance. He knew that his reputation as a composer was dependant upon self advertisement and only through performance could he realise a following for his music and its objectives.

As one might expect, in his student days Skryabin was indeed interested in virtuosity and became a little jealous of Josef Lhevinne's miraculous technique. Lhevinne was a fellow student at the Moscow Conservatory and it was Skryabin's wish to outshine him by playing Balakirev's Islamey and Liszt's Don Juan Fantasia more brilliantly. He over

practised and badly injured his right hand. He couldn't use it at all for a while and this gave rise to his Two Pieces Op.9 for left hand alone, which he often used in recitals much later in his career but he was indeed lucky not to have had his concert career cut disastrously short by this reckless action. Whilst being unable to use his right hand, he developed the technique of the left, which many writers have assumed accounts for the difficult left hand parts in his compositions for the piano.

Skryabin was never allowed to forget his folly as all through his concert career his right hand remained weaker than his left, and this often worried him. However, his wish to play the Don Juan Fantasia brilliantly was granted when he presented it in his final examination recital winning a gold medal. But soon after, at the outset of his concert career, Skryabin was still very much concerned about the weakness of his right hand as Julius Engel described in his biographical sketch of Skryabin published in *Musical Contemporary*, 1916 – “In 1893 he wore on both arms red woollen over-sleeves, obviously homemade and very conspicuous. When playing in public, before he began, he would point to his right hand as if asking for indulgence”. Never again, in the whole of his career, did he ever practise. Often an hour or an hour and a half a day would suffice when concert dates were approaching.

Much later in his career Skryabin himself did admit to one other weakness. He told G. E. Conus that if he had to be examined in sight-reading, “I should come a cropper over a Kuhlau Sonatine”. Skryabin never considered himself a good sight reader but this was no handicap for a concert pianist. His general musicianship seems to have been more than adequate, although he had no time for academic exercises. He always wanted to apply his musicianship to the development of his own art, much to the annoyance of some of his professors at the conservatory. He would often give demonstrations of new orchestral works from the full score manuscript and positively revelled in improvisation at the piano. Like all concert pianists he had a good ear and an excellent memory, and he appears to have been a child prodigy too, as at the age of six he was able to play a piece he had heard for the first time, and at eight gave a rendering of a Bach Gavotte and of Mendelssohn's Gondolier's Song, without music, after only one hearing.

So what was it then, that really held his audiences? For some it was his philosophical ideas, for others it was fashionable, but for many it was a number of things, not least of all his music because he had many followers who identified with and understood his music. They understood all that was new in his striving. They recognized that Skryabin, unlike other concert pianists, was not interpreting the printed notes, but recreating his music as he played. In this way the listener was involved directly in the creation of the new music.

Although Skryabin's beginnings were, to some extent, Chopinesque, he soon developed a highly individual style in his compositions, and as Alfred Swan remarked, it was not so much his words and philosophical ideas but “the exquisite sounds and harmonies, the incantational rhythms and magic formulae that he extracted from the piano”, that held his audiences. Swan went on to describe recitals which he attended in St. Petersburg, given in Skryabin's last years when his reputation as a concert pianist and composer had been secured. “The spell was real, he said, “and when the concert was ended no one thought of leaving. With a mighty wave, the audience would rise from their seats and rush towards the platform screaming, applauding, hurling at the triumphant composer, names of pieces that they wanted to be repeated or played over and above the programme. A second concert then began, often lasting half as long as the first and not until the composer was utterly exhausted would he be allowed to retire”.

As a teacher, Skryabin insisted to his pupils that the first quality to be sought for in performance was intoxication, and as a performer he constantly strived for, and for the

most part, successfully achieved his aim. Skryabin's success was gained with "a technique of nerves", to use his own words, and on the platform at least, a charismatic personality. Maria Nemenova-Lunz (1879-1934), one of Skryabin's pupils, said that "when he sat at the piano his whole body, his hand gestures and movements of the head, so characteristic of him, seemed to translate the mood and meaning of the music into action". It was his platform personality and performance then, which attracted and held his audience perhaps. His physical appearance had little to do with the attraction. He was not very imposing, rather small and in the words of Sabaneyev, "insignificant in appearance and unnoticeable in a crowd". In 1909 Sabaneyev was to describe him further saying that, "he had an insignificant little beard and a fluffy, surprisingly dashing moustache, a sort of survival of his 'officerism'. His physiognomy was nervous, livid; he gazed absentmindedly upward; he had brown eyes, small but with wide open lids, with a sort of intoxication in his glance. There was something of a wild animal in his eyes, not a beast of prey, but some little creature such as a marmot. He was affable and exquisitely polite – but in his politeness there was an awful distance from all these people who surrounded him with friendly effusiveness".

In summing up then, there seems to be plenty of evidence to suggest that Skryabin was indeed a pianist of some calibre. He captured the imagination of his followers and held his audiences. His recitals were events not to be missed. They caused excitement in the musical world and he was hailed as a star, not only by the public but by fellow musicians, some of whom were of an older generation. He possessed all the basic qualities of a concert pianist. His memory and technique were excellent. He learned things quickly, had a very good sense of pitch and his pedal effects were outstanding. Safanov, his piano professor, said of his pedal technique, "He made the instrument breathe". When Skryabin was playing he told his class, "Don't look at his hands; look at his feet".

We know that he had small hands and that his right hand troubled him from time to time but this appears to have been nothing too serious as he never had to cancel a performance because of it. What he lacked in his right hand he seems to have more than made up for in the technique of his left. His phrasing was subtle and precise, and in the words of his pupil, Maria Nemenova-Lunz, "he worried more than anything else about sound. 'You must caress the keyboard. Don't pound it as if you hate it', he would say. He worked indefatigably on tonal shadings. He made us repeat a note forever. He helped us find ways of striking it to get separate colours. He kept us interested in the sound and life of the instrument. How valuable for technique!"

The only two areas of his technique where there remains any doubt in the minds of a number of people, are his tone quality and rhythm. In 1906, the critic of the New York Herald was complaining of his "small tone" and Richard Aldrich in the New York Times wrote of his lack of "any considerable command of richness in depth of tone". However, the number of critics mentioning this is small in comparison to the number who do not and Skryabin's pupil Nemenova-Lunz offers further insight into this aspect of Skryabin's approach to the piano when she wrote of his interest in sound production as already mentioned, and in admitting, "It is true that he did not have a frightening fortissimo. He did not much like 'materialistic sonority'. He always said that the deepest forte must always sound soft". It is clear that Skryabin did not seek the brilliant and crashing Lisztian fortissimo of the nineteenth century tradition but a more rich and rounded organ-like quality which would help his music soar as he intended.

As far as the allegation of playing everything with an unsteady rhythm is concerned, it is difficult to establish the truth of the matter, but again, his pupil Maria Nemenova-Lunz states that, "He wouldn't accept music without rhythm. He made us think out every formal passage by likening it to speech or talking". Also, in 1914, the London Times

praised his “effortless energy of rhythm” and the following year a Moscow critic wrote, “He breaks the chains of strict rhythm and makes rhythm sound anew every time he plays, filling his performances with freshness”.

As with his approach to sound production, Skryabin had a new approach to rhythm. He probably played quite freely but as noted earlier, a good performance of his music depends so much on rhythm to attain that energy and subtle dance-like quality which is so much his very own, Strict adherence to time signatures in his music produces a performance without any true Skryabin spirit. The magic has disappeared, and this may point to one of the reasons why his followers were so aghast at the performances given by Rachmaninov and others in the early part of the twentieth century.

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