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Sublime Scriabin

The Baryshnikov Arts Center presents a special performance titled 'Spectral Scriabin'

By Jonathan Leaf



Photo by Chris Lee

Why is it that when great figures in the performing arts work together, the results are so rarely like those produced by the pairing of Stravinsky and Nijinsky at the Ballets Russe and so often like the meeting of director Michael Mayer and Green Day for the musical *American Idiot*?

Perhaps part of the problem is that the producers intent on throwing "talent" together like spaghetti at a wall and seeing what sticks, don't first ask a simple question: What can each of the parties attached to the project contribute that's relevant and useful?

A contrast with this "let's mix and match and see if something great happens" approach will be seen Oct. 25 and 26 when the Baryshnikov Arts Center (BAC) presents a special performance titled "Spectral Scriabin," that matches up the talents of a heralded Georgian pianist, Broadway's best regarded lighting designer and the music of one of the greatest late Romantic composers.

The composer whose music is being performed—in conjunction with a spectacular light show—is Alexander Scriabin. If the name isn't familiar to you, that's a shame. For while Scriabin died young in a mysterious episode of blood poisoning, the music that this Russian pianist-composer, world traveler and supreme egomaniac left is among the most grand, grandiose and beautiful ever written. It's a fascinating mix of the subjective styles of Chopin, Liszt and Wagner. He's always been a favorite of Romantic conductors and pianists, and with good cause: Intent on writing music that would be exceptionally melodic, intensely emotional and towering in scale, Scriabin never produced anything ordinary.

Brought up as a small, sickly child in a household of women, Scriabin developed an intense sense—or need to believe—in his own supremacy. He also learned on his own to build and sell pianos, and, in spite of having tiny hands, he gained fame as a concert pianist. And after reading Nietzsche and various Indian philosophers, he came to the idea of producing a universal art form of his own creation. All of the Himalayas, he suggested, would someday be used to create a multi-colored light show to accompany his music. Each key would represent a color, and the music would become transformative. Then, he claimed, a new world would begin.

Likely that won't happen after the BAC performance. But BAC demonstrates a rare mix of culture and smarts in its pairing of lighting designer Jennifer Tipton and pianist Eteri Andjaparidze in a performance of Scriabin's music. Tipton is a MacArthur "Genius" and Tony Award-winning lighting designer whose novel and effective ideas about lighting have turned countless Broadway shows, ballets and operas that seemed dead on arrival into hits. Andjaparidze is an acclaimed pianist with extensive knowledge of Scriabin's repertoire.

Yes, here is an attempt to combine gifted folk with the right skills to realize a specific artistic vision—a literal vision. The result is apt to be something better than *American Idiot*. It might even be something unforgettable.

Oct. 25 & 26, BAC, 450 W. 37th St., 212-868-4444, www.bacnyc.org; 8, \$20.