THE COMPOSER'S APPROACH

TO THE SYMPHONIC POEM

By ALEC PEMBERTON

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Music
And the Honors College of the University of Oregon
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
Bachelor of Science
November 2009

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Alexander Pemberton for the degree of

Bachelor of Science in the School of Music

November 17th, 2009

Title: THE COMPOSER'S APPROACH TO THE SYMPHONIC POEM

Approved: ███████████████

Professor David Riley

The symphonic poem is a term we often apply quite liberally to orchestral works. Because of this, we have grouped together many very different pieces of music, each with extremely unique qualities. If we choose to study any of the many numerous symphonic poems, we find that each composer approaches the work with a specific purpose in mind and accomplishes his task with particular techniques. More importantly, we find that the composer's distinctive approach has significant consequences for the listener. My research compares two symphonic poems to prove these points, Sergei Rachmaninoff's *The Isle of the Dead Op. 29* and *The Poem of Ecstasy Op. 54* by Alexander Scriabin. In the first we find that Rachmaninoff creates the symphonic poem and all of its defining features using more traditional techniques. In the second composition, I will argue that Scriabin chooses to abandon convention and instead develops a product unlike any preceding programmatic work. My most

profound argument states that one of these approaches fulfils the common goal of a

symphonic poem, that is to narrate a clear and complete story, while the other does

not.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

In the years 1872 and 1873 Russia gave birth to two of its greatest musical composers, Alexander Scriabin on January 6th 1872 and Sergei Rachmaninoff on April 1st 1873. In their childhood the two composers led similar lives. They demonstrated exceptional musical talent at a young age and hence received strict piano training both before they were eight. They both dealt with familial issues that one might expect in nineteenth century Russia, that is, death of siblings, loss of parent, and care from overbearing orthodox female relatives. The two young pianists inevitably crossed paths before they were eighteen when they both attended the Moscow Conservatory. There each showed astounding proficiency at the piano and a unique talent at musical composition. But as their time at the conservatory progressed, their lives quickly diverged in almost every way possible. Rachmaninoff and Scriabin would never become the musical twins that one might have expected, given the interesting scenario.

By the end of their schooling at the conservatory, they had each become a separate and distinct person and musician. Even physically they had become polar opposites. Rachmaninoff had become a very tall gangly man with giant hands and feet. According to Stravinsky, he had become a "six-and-a-half foot scowl." Scriabin never grew past five-feet four-inches. He walked daintily like a ballet dancer. His meager

health, as "delicate as a wristwatch,"[1] haunted him his entire life and would never recover from a pimple above his lip that ultimately caused his early death.

But the two were separated by more than their height. Perhaps the largest gap that grew between them arose in the sphere of philosophical and religious beliefs. Scriabin became a devout mystic and developed his own system of beliefs that even he had difficulty explaining. In his religion he was the Messiah. His musical compositions, which he called "manifestations," were the portal to the next level of being, they would "transport the listener fantastically into another world."[2] Rachmaninoff, on the other hand, spent his life contemplating the more simple pleasures of life like his family and driving his car. He did spend a good amount of time contemplating the meaning of death, and we see this in his music, but he never developed any profound beliefs beyond the idea that life leads only to death.

The music that each produced was a direct result of these beliefs. For Scriabin, his music was anything but just music. "I cannot understand how to write *just* music now. How boring!"[3] he wrote a friend describing his work on *The Poem of Ecstasy*. Each piece had a purpose, a message. Only his earliest works might be deemed pure music without a program. Rachmaninoff, on the other hand, composed music more for music's sake. His works are certainly not devoid of emotion and philosophical insight, but most often his thoughts provide only inspiration. He never usually included any

---

[1] Bowers. *The New Scriabin.* Pg.28
[2] Bowers. *The New Scriabin.* Pg.62
[3] Bowers. *The New Scriabin.* Pg.108

sort of written description or subtitle along with the scores, because he wished that the listener have the liberty to interpret the work for himself.

In 1909 both composers coincidentally composed a symphonic work of the same genre. Scriabin and Rachmaninoff each successfully completed a symphonic poem. Scriabin's work, which was also his fourth symphony, he entitled *The Poem of Ecstasy Op.54*. Rachmaninoff produced *The Isle of the Dead Op.29*. As with all symphonic poems, these two works were defined as such because they each illustrated or evoked an extra-musical idea or story. Traditionally, this extra-musical story – we usually refer to it as the program – is taken from an artistic work, i.e. a story or novel, a painting, or a poem, that was created by someone other than the composer. The program is generally depicted within the music through themes, motives, harmonic or textural colors, and the overall progression of events that the sequence of images create. Of our two composers under discussion, one followed these traditions to a rather strict degree, while the other chose a more unbeaten path.

Rachmaninoff chose the more traditional approach. *The Isle of the Dead* is based on a painting of the same name. Within the symphonic poem, he uses the expected means to develop his chosen program. Various melodic themes and textures evoke many images that become apparent to even the least sensitive listener. More importantly, the sequence in which the musical images are placed tells a story that parallels that of the painting.

Scriabin, on the other hand, breaks convention. The program is taken from no other artist; it is instead based on completely original ideas conceived by the composer

himself. Within the music, there exist melodic elements that elicit images pertaining to the program. Yet, Scriabin steps very far from tradition, when he places and develops these ideas in an extremely abstract setting.

The consequences of these differing approaches affect, more than anyone else, the listener. *The Isle of the Dead*, in the eyes of the audience, is more simplistic in nature. Its images are clear and their relationship to the painting is easily discerned. The layout of the numerous sections of the work – we often label this as the structure – contains apparent ideas that pertain very unmistakably to the program. In the end, the listener walks away remembering the images evoked and the story told. *The Poem of Ecstasy* leaves the listener with a less complete picture. The music certainly induces some interesting thoughts at different points, but the listener is never told a whole story with any larger unifying theme or message. *The Poem of Ecstasy* imparts to listeners a sense of pure beauty rather than a narrative. At the work's debut, members of the audience were quick to admit their lack of comprehension, but even quicker to proclaim their love for the "wondrous beauty…immensity and grandeur."[4]

Part One: *Isle of the Dead* by Sergei Rachmaninoff

The Origins of the Work

Rachmaninoff began work on his first and only symphonic poem, *The Isle of the Dead, Op.29*, sometime between 1907 and 1909. He had expressed interest in composing a symphonic poem a few years prior but had difficulty in finding a worthy

---

[4] O'Connell. *Overtures, Tone Poems, and Other Orchestral Works.* Pg. 414

subject from which he could base his program. However, this changed when, in a Leipzig picture gallery, he came across a black-and-white reproduction of Arnold Böcklin's painting, *The Isle of the Dead* (shown below in color).[5] Today the painting is considered rather mundane though at the time it was deemed quite original. For a short time the painting was extremely popular among Germans with a print in many homes.[6] It is said that Böcklin's creation moved the composer greatly. He was particularly impressed, as Rachmaninoff described, by the painting's "massive architecture and the mystic message."[7] However, in retrospective speculation it seems more likely that his choice in such a painting was not so much due to his deep admiration of the work, but more due to the fact that the painting presented the dark themes that Rachmaninoff liked and that best suited his compositional styles. As Piggott points out, "one cannot imagine that he [Rachmaninoff] would have made an equal success of a musical interpretation of Böcklin's companion picture *The Isle of the Living*."[8]

---

[5] Quite some time after the symphonic poem had been performed and published, Rachmaninoff came across the original colored version of the Bocklin's painting. The composer was not extremely impressed and said that had he seen the colored print first, he might not have written the score.

[6] One might say it was the 19th century equivalent of Vladimer Tretchikoff's painting the "Green Girl," a trite painting that swept across the world with popularity in the 1960's.

[7] Martyn. Pg.204

[8] Piggott. Pg.17

Arnold Böcklin, German painter (1872-1901)[9]

The painting portrays a small island with tall rocky cliffs. Towards the center

of the isle there are some towering trees and a few plain structures (perhaps

sepulchers) with dark windows. The island, which we can assume is the *Isle of the*

Dead, is surrounded by a murky body of water, presumably the River Styx. In the

forefront is a small boat heading towards the isle. It contains a rower maneuvering the

boat; this is thought to be Charon. The boat also holds a white coffin carrying a dead

man to his final fate, and a figure dressed entirely in white that towers over the casket.

Most speculate this white figure to be the mourning wife of the corpse.

Rachmaninoff started and finished the work within only a few months' time.

The score was completely finished by the middle of April 1909 and debuted at a

concert for the Moscow Philharmonic Society only a few weeks later. The work

received a very warm applause during its premiere and for each performance

---

[9] The artist actually produced several versions of the same painting. The version above was the first produced in 1880 entitled the "Basil" version. While all of the paintings do have significant differences in coloring and detail, the nuances are subtle and all present the same ideas. It is not known which version Rachmaninoff came across in the exhibition. Whichever version he did see, it would have been a black-and-white reproduction.

thereafter. It has remained up to present day a very popular orchestral work, possibly Rachmaninoff's most popular aside from his Second Symphony. For some, including Patrick Piggott, "Rachmaninoff was at the height of his powers when… he wrote this work, undoubtedly one of his masterpieces."[10] The work is in one movement that in performance lasts approximately twenty minutes.

It is debatable how closely the symphonic poem follows the painting. There are several theories as to how the motives, textures and structure found within the music align themselves with the painting. For some critics the canvas was merely a platform from which Rachmaninoff developed his own independent ideas that only somewhat related to the details of the picture. For others the themes found within the music are without a doubt borne of themes within the painting, and the structure of the symphonic poem faithfully follows the story that Böcklin puts in place. Because Rachmaninoff remained for the most part reticent about the meaning and origin of his music, we have no basis to repudiate such differing claims.

In my opinion and for the sake of my analysis, I choose to stand somewhere in the middle. We will see that Rachmaninoff does bring to life some parts of the painting and tells the story that Böcklin established. Yet we will also learn that his main goal of the symphonic poem was not simply to depict a corpse being curried across the River Styx. In fact some sections of the music cannot be found in the painting at all but rather stem from the composer's own thoughts prompted by the painting.

---

[10] Piggott. Pg.17

Analysis

Rachmaninoff chose to begin his work by describing not the island itself but instead the small boat that is seen moving towards it. As the piece commences, the cellos, contrabasses and harp slowly climb up from an almost inaudible level, inaudible in both dynamics and register. For the first few measures, the music remains so muted and muffled that one cannot tell when the piece began, perhaps a suggestion that the music had been in existence for an eternity, simply imperceptible to the ear. But as the mysterious sounds become louder and clearer, one can gradually discern a clumsy yet daedal five-count motive placed within a five-count meter. The motive arduously repeats itself over and over again in various and ever-changing textures. As seen below, it is divided into two separate phrases, one being two beats in length and the other being three in length.

The symbolism of this motive is likely the least debated aspect of the entire work. Authorities unanimously agree that the lopsided rhythm describes the repeated movement of the oars as Charon ferries the corpse across the River Styx. The shorter two-beat phrase represents the oars quickly gliding through the air, the longer three-beat phrase represents the oars slowly pushing against the resistance of the water.

The first four approximate minutes – the first 114 measures to be exact – which I have labeled as section A[11], essentially comprise a contrapuntal collage of this

---

[11] In order to best explain the details of the symphonic poem and present my argument, I have divided the piece into five sections: A, B, C, D, and E. These

said motive. The orchestration consists of mostly bass and tenor instruments situated

in tight intervals (mostly thirds, fourths and fifths) playing in the bottom of their

natural range.

The typical orchestration of the section is very low and dense as seen in the example to the left. This example was derived from the full score at measure 12, which was condensed onto a single stave.

Aside from the growth in volume and orchestration that occurs over the length

of section A, this segment of the poem remains rather stagnant. We can attribute this

to the unchanging tempo, the consistent void of dynamical caprices, and most

importantly to the limited harmonic vocabulary: the section begins in a minor and

remains in a minor without any significant departure from the key.

There is, however, a secondary motive worth noting that makes a few

appearances within this section and later in the piece. As the rowing of Charon grows

louder and thicker over the course of section A, we hear a counter-melody of

prolonged whole-notes that contrasts the quicker movement of the five-count phrase.

The slow moaning melody, which is first presented in the upper register of the French

horn in measure 25, seems to mimic an ancient horn call. Here the listener might

imagine Charon announcing his presence as he moves through the water. And this

vocal announcement from ferryman of Hades, as one would only expect, speaks of

death. Cleverly, Rachmaninoff built this small melody from a fragment of the *Dies*

---

divisions are based partially on statements by Rachmaninoff (which I will explain
later) and harmonic, textural, and melodic changes that will become more apparent as
we look further into the music.

Irae, a very famous Latin thirteenth century hymn, meaning "day of wrath." He only

uses the first four notes and slightly alters the intervals so the allusion is only

perceptible to the avid listener. Below I have reproduced the hymn in its entirety as

would be found in the Catholic liturgy. For comparison I have also reproduced the

melody played by the French horn in measure 25.

This excerpt is an obvious reflection of the *Dies Irae* with only slight

alterations in rhythm and harmonic intervals that give the theme more of an expressive

breadth, a characteristic commonly found in Rachmaninoff's writing. The most

apparent change is his transposition of the first three notes up by a third. The

difference may appear large on paper but to the ear is hardly noticeable.

The famous hymn, which was included in the Catholic liturgy up until the

1970's, has been implemented in numerous works from a variety of composers. We

see its reference, for example, in Johannes Brahms' *Klavierstück, Op. 118, No. 6* as

well as Liszt's *Totentanz* where it provided the basis for the entire work.

Rachmaninoff used the hymn more than anyone else. We find its placement in many

of his works, works from the beginning of his career at the age of twenty-four with the

Isle of the Dead and two years before his death in his *Rhapsody on a Theme of*

Paganini.[12] O'Connell explains that this heavy fixation is most likely because, "he [Rachmaninoff] took a kind of wry pleasure in contemplating quite objectively the climax of life, which is death."[13] This contemplation of death is the most we ever see the composer spending any time in the area of philosophical/religious thought. We actually see this manifest itself in several different compositional techniques and melodic allusions, not only the implementation of the *Dies Irae*. His reference to the Catholic Hymn was likely his most common. We might never know how Rachmaninoff's general fixation with death came to be. Seroff speculates that "his gloomy preoccupation with the word fate… might have been a reaction caused by his feeling that he had 'aged terribly' and was terrified that he would soon join the devil."[14] Yet his *Prelude in C-sharp minor Op.3 no.2,* a work imbued with death more than any other, was completed by the composer's twentieth birthday. It is hard to believe that a young man at the age of twenty was concerned with his age and death. We might be better off concluding that the somber qualities consistently found in Rachmaninoff's music were there because putting them there was what the composer did best. (This is a fact he probably became aware of when he debuted himself as a pianist/composer with a series of works, and his very dark *Prelude in C-sharp minor Op.3 no.2* single-handedly launched his career.) Though his "gloomy preoccupation" may have an obscured origin, its presence is anything but. Today it has become a defining characteristic of his music. One can only assume that *The Isle of the Dead*

---

[12] O'Connell. *Overtures, Tone Poems and Other Orchestral Works.* Pg.332
[13] O'Connell. *Overtures, Tone Poems and Other Orchestral Works.* Pg.332
[14] Seroff. Pg.100

presented an all too perfect opportunity to please such obsessions. Perhaps Norris puts it best when he writes, "the pervading aura of doom is enhanced, as in so much of Rachmaninoff's music, by subtle references to the *Dies irae* chant.["][15]

As we continue moving through section A, the music swells and intensifies but then slowly lightens and departs from the dark death-like mood that it had reveled in earlier. After several measures of teetering between major and minor, hope and despair, Rachmaninoff settles down into a more blissful state where the dark colors of the painting can no longer be found. The change in mood is best accentuated by the sudden entrance of a solo violin that "like a voice in protest… wanders through the darker harmonies of the wind instruments.["][16] The melody ascends in large, yet very melodious, leaps until it reaches a high point two octaves later. Here we might imagine this "voice in protest" delicately – perhaps lethargically – reaching for the heavens. Below is an excerpt of the melody first introduced by the solo violin in measure 144.

But the reprieve denoted by the melody is short-lived. As the violin quickly ascends and reaches a highpoint, having spanned two octaves, it is capped off with

---

[15] Norris. Pg.101
[16] O'Connell. *Overtures, Tone Poems and Other Orchestral Works.* Pg.334

none other than a subtle reference to the *Dies Irae*.[17] The optimism that the violin

educes with its series of large ascending intervals is quickly shot down by the "day of

wrath." The listener, if he had felt any enlivenment from the first half of the melody,

might be brought back into the reality of the painting by the second. This melody,

which repeats itself, first with the solo violin and then with strings and woodwinds,

represents the main melodic component of what I have labeled section B (mm. 144-

212).

Within section B there are some remnants of the dense harmonic intervals and

low textures that dominated section A, but for the most part the harmonies are much

more open (we see more intervals of fourths and fifths) and the textures are

considerably lighter (the orchestration is equally carried by soprano and bass

instruments).

As of measure 144 we see larger intervals and orchestration
that is more evenly dispersed.

Where section A began and finished in a minor, section B begins in C major. The shift

in key signature is the most perceptible of changes. (It should be noted the relationship

between the previous key of a minor and the newly introduced key of C major, the

latter needing only one note altered to become the former once again. The composer

takes advantage of such an opportunity when he caps off the ascending melody with

---

[17] In this fragment of the *Dies Irae* the same alterations apply as found in the version
played by the French horn except for the change in intervals. In this case the first three
notes are in their original position.

the *Dies Irae*. The accompaniment supports the violin while it ascends with a C major

triad but then subtly switches to a minor as the violin recalls the chant).

This relatively joyful section as heard in the music cannot be found in the

correlating painting, for within Böcklin's work there are no such qualities. The

anomaly within the symphonic poem is in essence a divergence from the painting, or

in the composer's words, "a supplement to the picture".[18] As Martyn explains this

passage, "the composer does not merely represent in music the physical details of the

painting but also expresses the thoughts prompted by it, about death, about life."[19]

According to the composer this "supplement" was to be the "life"[20] section of the

work. If we take Martyn's claim to be true, we find some interesting information about

the composer's views on life. Most importantly, we could theorize that with the

placement of the *Dies Irae* at the end of the ascending melody discussed earlier,

Rachmaninoff reveals his belief that in the end death overcomes life, or as Seroff

states, "fate can be conquered only by death."[21] Yet for some critics this portion of the

music can still be correlated with the painting. If we wish this the case, we must think

of it as "a passage in which the Soul [of the corpse] wistfully recalls the joys of earthly

---

[18] In a letter Rachmaninoff wrote after the piece was debuted, he stated how the idea
expressed in section B "does not belong to the 'picture'; it is in reality a 'supplement'
to the picture."
[19] Martyn. Pg.205
[20] Rachmaninoff himself applied the term of "life" to the piece in a letter he wrote
after the work had debuted. In referring to sections A and B he said, "in the former is
death – in the latter is life." (Martyn. Pg.205)
[21] Seroff. Pg.100

existence."[22] As the dead man is ferried across the river towards his inevitable fate, he

perhaps remembers the life that he once had. However one chooses to interpret this

"life" passage, it is within the relationship betwixt the two contrasting sections, where

life and death have been beautifully placed side by side, that many believe

Rachmaninoff's genius shows its true potential. His stark contrasts, as we will see

more of later, play a very large role in the piece.

The divergence from the painting does not last long. Cries from the cellos and

basses emerge from the deep. Slowly but insistently the orchestra thickens and the

harmonies darken. As the intensity reaches a climax and the dark colors have clearly

taken over, it is all too apparent that death has overcome life. Rachmaninoff's

"supplemental" passage was a mere tease; just as the listener begins to digest what has

been put in front of him, he is pulled back down into the stark scene of Böcklin's

painting.

Measure 212, where the textures and themes of the opening return, I have

labeled as section C. Even though the material found in this section is very similar to

material found in section A, it contains some important differences. Section C, in its

entirety, is more intense than its preceding relative. The most interesting factor in this

change is the key progression from a minor to c minor. This is worth noting because c

minor has a natural distress on its own, but even more so when in relation to the key of

a minor found in section A. Along with the same thick harmonic intervals and dark

textures, we see an increase in the strength of the orchestration and in dynamic

---

[22] Norris. Pg.102

markings. All of these changes are important because it means that the material found

in section C has overpowered anything else found in the piece thus far. Rachmaninoff

has made quite sure that he has shattered any hope that might have been found in his

preceding "life" section.

The repetitive rowing does not last very long, for section C is rather brief. The

music quickly grows and climaxes in E minor. It is perhaps here that the boat has

reached the end of its journey and the listener is now introduced to the "craggy

coastline of Böcklin's imaginary Insel der Toten [Isle of the Dead]."[23] But

immediately following this climax, the music wanes in strength and switches from a 5-

count meter to a more usual and organic 3-count meter. Once section C seems to have

completely died off, it manages one more short burst of intensity before immediately

leading into what I have labeled as section D.

In section D Rachmaninoff once again carries the listener out of the painting

and into his own imagination. This section, like section B, should be considered

another "life" section of the piece. Like before we can imagine Rachmaninoff leaving

the painting and developing the music off of his own thoughts on life. Or we can take

a second approach and assume that the music remains within the confines of the

painting and portrays the poor corpse reminiscing about his time on earth. However it

is interpreted, the exuberant qualities are more intense and fervent than found in the

previous "life" section. While section B was a lethargic, wistful attempt at recalling

life, section D, as Piggott well explains, is a "passionate outburst which expresses the

---

[23] Norris. Pg.101

departing spirit's last reluctant farewell to the earthly joys and sorrows it is leaving forever."[24]

The orchestration within this section is made up of mostly soprano instruments playing in their upper registers. We see an absence of bass instruments and those that are heard play higher than normal. This is different than section B, which contained a larger range of voices that grounded the music. Here we also see much tighter harmonic intervals.

This reduction represents the typical orchestration one would find in section D.

At this point the meter is in three and the tempo is slightly brisker than anything heard previously. As where all of the previous sections were driven by a slow and steady dirge-like tempo, section D is dominated by heavy *ruboto* that elicits a sense of liberation. When all of this is combined, the music appears to fanatically soar and we can understand why Piggott labeled the passage as a "passionate outburst."

The following is an excerpt of the primary melody within this section.

This passage is certainly melodic in content, yet we see little use of defined motives that elicit any ideas of the programmatic elements of the work. In previous sections we defined specific motives that inferred images or ideas, but here we cannot. Instead, the

---

[24] Piggott. Pg.19

melody finds its origins more in the composer's Russian heritage than anything else. The passage is highly chromatic with numerous lower neighbor tones, something found plentifully in works by earlier Russian Romantics, and their placement in a whirling waltz-like syncopation conveys a very romantic fluidity. Combine this with spontaneous intervallic jumps and the always beautiful Russian expansiveness, and one cannot help but think that Rachmaninoff created the passage from a stream-of-consciousness.

As the melody climbs even higher, we can envision the dead man becoming more impassioned as he recalls his formal life and perhaps more distressed as he realizes that it is gone forever. But once again, Rachmaninoff all too quickly decides to leave these thoughts and return to the painting. The sinister colors of the Isle begin to take over. But surprisingly, as the brass section tries ardently to pull the listener down, the strings climb higher as if in revolt. For a short period we can imagine good and evil, life and death, pulling against the other. Though try as he might, the man's longing for the past proves no match for his inevitable doom. The brass section with all its power repeats the *Dies Irae* again and again until victorious over the strings. With a series of deep chords from the bass, all remnants of life are smashed and it becomes all too clear that the "*Dies Irae* is the ultimate victor."[25] This begins what I have labeled section E, the fifth and final section of the piece.

With the progression of section E, it becomes even more apparent that death has won. Again and again Rachmaninoff reiterates his point with the *Dies Irae*. The

---

[25] Norris. Pg.103

first climax that began the section rather quickly dies down. But this is only slight; the music looses little momentum before beginning to grow again. Here the composer repeats the first four notes of the *Dies Irae* continuously with each repetition becoming successively louder. The violins become more frantic. When it seems that the music has reached a plateau, the brass return yet again with an "even more hectic climax."[26] After several harsh strikes, the sounds die down again, this time to a quiet hum. Amid the subtle drone of the tremolo strings come a series of spontaneous chords, which Martyn labels "mortal blows,"[27] that perhaps count down to the poor man's impending doom. As this final climax dies away, a short pause is followed by a musical collage of the *Dies Irae*. Various instruments chime in with their own version of the first four notes. Piggott describes this as "an extraordinary passage in which the words '*Dies Irae*' seem to be muttered by a host of mysterious voices."[28] (Such a claim intrigues the imagination. Maybe it is the voices of those already brought to the isle. Perhaps it is of demons watching with anticipation.) But then out of the chanting comes a solo violin that climbs up in a series of perfect fifths, recalling the lethargic melody of section B. As the corpse looks back one last time, a wistful passage from the oboe reminds us of the passionate melody found in section D. Both melodies remain quiet and restrained, perhaps embodying the man's now week state or better yet evading the notice of Charon as if only a secret between the composer and the listener.

---

[26] Piggott. Pg.19
[27] Martyn. Pg.205
[28] Piggott. Pg.19

Whatever it may be, the last backward glance disappears as suddenly as it came. Immediately thereafter the piece transitions back into the 5-count meter along with the initial material that began the work. By now the body has been abandoned on the isle and Charon has begun his journey back across the river. We never find out what fate awaits the man, for Rachmaninoff too abandons the corpse and instead chooses to follow Charon. As the music slowly tapers off and the symphonic poem comes to an end, the last image left upon the listener is the persistent movement of Charon's oars as he glides through the water.

Stepping back and looking at the piece as a whole reveals some interesting notes. The structure of the work – we could label it as a play on standard 5-part rondo form – places the "death" sections on all sides of the "life" sections and at the beginning and end of the work. With this it appears once again that Rachmaninoff tells us "fate can be conquered only by death."[29] The larger series of chord progressions has something to say a well. Through the five sections he creates a sequence of minor thirds. This rather atypical movement unsettles the listener's ears. In the closing moments of the work, Rachmaninoff never includes a dominant to help solidify the tonic. The music hence tapers off without any true resolve.

---

[29] Seroff, Victor. Pg.100

Part Two: *The Poem of Ecstasy* by Alexander Scriabin

The Origins of the Work

Scriabin spent no more time on a single composition than he did on his fourth symphony, subtitled *The Poem of Ecstasy*. The piece consumed nearly three years of his life from 1905 to 1908. (Letters to friends reveal that Scriabin developed initial ideas for the work in the beginning of 1904.)[30] Unlike Rachmaninoff and *The Isle of the Dead*, Scriabin would not base the program of his symphonic poem on the product of another artist; he would instead base *The Poem of Ecstasy* on a completely original storyline he had developed himself.

In brief, the symphonic poem describes the process through which a great artist (Scriabin was referring to himself) creates art. He labeled this as the "joy of creative activity."[31] The work takes the listener through the joys and frustrations, or as Bowers explains, "strange gamut of feelings,"[32] that the general artist must face in order to achieve success. The composer went so far as to label these various phases, each representing a part of the larger "creative process." For these he conceived of six terms, "strife after the ideal," referring to the difficult first steps the artist must take to begin the production once the initial idea is conceptualized, "awakening of the soul," "spirit in flight," "human love," "will to rise," and the final stage represented by "creative force." (Scriabin had originally entitled the "creative force" as "I am God," which was then shortened into simply "I am." For whatever reason, he later changed it

---

[30] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.126
[31] O'Connell. *Overtures, Tone Poems and Other Orchestral Works.* Pg.413
[32] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.130

to the more modest term we see today.) The titles are somewhat self-explanatory and from them we can get an idea of what each phase of the journey to creation consisted of.

To get any more insight beyond these six terms, we must look to a different work of Scriabin's. Prior to the composition of his symphonic poem, he wrote a written poem, also entitled *The Poem of Ecstasy*, that revolves around the same ideas. The poetry is a work separate from the musical composition. As Schloezer, a friend and biographer of Scriabin makes clear; there was no "musico-poetic unit,... the words did not comment on the music, and likewise, the music was not an illustration of the words."[33] Unfortunately, as we will see soon enough, it is difficult to understand what Scriabin was trying to say with the music, so if we want to learn of the programmatic material, we must ignore Schloezer and turn to the poetry to "comment on the music." (Most critics have been confronted with the same dilemma and resolved to do the same.) The strongest link betwixt the two is the incorporation of the six programmatic themes into the skeleton of either work. The written poem, which is comprised of several smaller sections, spends time elaborating on each theme. At certain points the poetry presents interesting images that help us understand this "creative process," and can be translated over to our analysis of the symphonic poem. For instance he begins his poem with a description of "strife after the ideal."

---

[33] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.130

Spirit,
Winged with thirst for life,
Is drawn into flight
On the summits of negation.
There, under the rays of its dream,
Emerges a magical world
Of heavenly forms and feelings
Spirit playing,
Spirit desiring.
Spirit creating all with a dream.
Surrenders to the bliss of love.
Mid the risen creations
It dwells in languor,
From the height of inspiration
Calls them to flower.
And drunken with soaring
It is ready to sink into oblivion.[34]

From this we can pull some interesting snippets that might help better understand the theme at hand. In "strife after the ideal," the "spirit...on the summit of negation...dwells in languor...ready to sink into oblivion."[35]

The poetry, like the music, is very complicated. There is a good amount of material that is confusing and seems unrelated to the central ideas of the poem. As Scriabin carries the reader through the "painful passage to...unconscious oblivion"[36] he seems to get carried away himself. He creates many images, like the "sting of a serpent" and the "bite of hyenas," that even his most loyal fans criticized, "how does he know what that feels like?" one friend complained.[37] Still, if we set aside some of the more muddled material we come across some interesting descriptors. Below I have

---

[34] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.131
[35] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.131
[36] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.130
[37] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.130

extracted some various phrases from the poetry and placed them next to one of the six

skeletal themes they represent.

"Strife after the ideal" - "spirit...on the summit of negation...dwells in languor...ready to sink into oblivion."[38]

"Awakening of the soul" – "Spirit playing, Spirit caressing...It is transported, it tittups, Dances and whirls...It is tormented, wearied."[39]

"Spirit in flight" – "Bright presentiments of shining rhythms awake within it. Sweet moment!"[40]

"Human love" – "Spirit, fully delighted...plays the struggle of love...combining opposing desires in single awareness, one love."[41]

"Will to rise" –"It pierces the dark abysses with glowing glances, it shouts with rage and fury...the battle blazes."[42]

"Creative force" – "Spirit, playing, changing, vibrates the universe, explaining, affirming...It was victorious, It was triumphant!... ALAS! IT HAS ATTAINED ITS PURPOSE."[43]

The program that we know so far is fairly straightforward. Yet there is a larger

and more obscure theme that drives the program of the music. As mentioned earlier,

the composer was a devout Mystic. Scriabin believed that he and his compositions

were the medium through which one could reach the next level of being. His last and,

as he claimed, "ultimate work" *Mysterium*, a work that was never completed due to his

sudden death, would be the portal to the new realm, and all preceding works

---

[38] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.131
[39] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.131
[40] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132
[41] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132
[42] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132
[43] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132

(especially *The Poem of Ecstasy*) were to "prepare the soul" for such action.[44] It is

within *The Poem of Ecstasy* that he chooses to illustrate the "creative process" he will

use to open the new realm. Beyond this statement it is difficult to say much more. To

determine how and where Scriabin implemented these ideas is nearly impossible. This

is partly due to the fact that we do not know what "preparing the soul for the next

realm" really means beyond what we can extrapolate here.

The composer also suffered from synaesthesia, a neurological anomaly that

caused the sensory of color and sound to cross. This meant that for every note he heard

he saw a specific color and for every color he saw he would hear a note. As would be

expected, this had a great effect on all of his compositions and likely shaped many of

the music qualities that we now know Scriabin so well for. The composer did not

acknowledge this phenomenon as an anatomical abnormality, but rather as part of his

mysticism. And he believed that if his music were to carry the listener to another

realm, colors would have to supplement the sounds. For the debut of *The Poem of*

Ecstasy the composer demanded that various colored lights be periodically illuminated

in synchronization with the music, an attempt to satisfy the two senses simultaneously.

The demand was carried out to a surprising success, although no such actions have

been repeated since.

---

[44] In reference to *The Poem of Ecstasy* Scriabin wrote to his patron Morozova stating, "I am working out a poem for orchestra. It is even bigger than the third symphony and prepares the soul to receive my next composition [*Mysterium*]" (Written in letter to a patron Morozova on the 6th of August 1905. Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* 129)

We must take these two caveats into account when defining the program of *The Poem of Ecstasy*. Scriabin certainly did when he wrote the music and would want us to follow suit. Unfortunately this is where things become perplexing. We cannot pin down any sound statements beyond what is denoted by the six themes and some short descriptors extracted from the poetry. Any more claims made about the program within the symphonic poem are only speculative.

This is the first and most significant reason why the listener has trouble completely understanding the program within Scriabin's work. That the composer begins with a program containing such convoluted material makes it difficult to tell a clear story to the listener. Because we, the analyzers, have no solid understanding of the program, we will not know what to look for in the music. The average listener, especially, will have such a problem, for he may not be familiar with Scriabin's mystical thoughts and "creative process."

Analysis

Let us, in our analysis, take a different route than we did with *The Isle of the Dead*. As we will see, Scriabin approached his composition differently than did Rachmaninoff and it makes most sense to follow such. Rachmaninoff's work is driven by a progression of small and large scale ideas that logically follow the other, and he probably conceived it that way. Scriabin, as I will explain below, probably did not conceive of the work from start to finish.

In *The Isle of the Dead* we came across small sections within the work where the material was driven by contrapuntal layering of a single theme, in most cases it was the *Dies Irae*. Scriabin utilized this method as well, but he did so for his entire work. He essentially approached his composition much the way J.S. Bach might have approached a fugue. Bach would have developed a theme – in Scriabin's case he developed multiple themes – and then built the entire work out of that material using the many methods of counterpoint. In *The Poem of Ecstasy*, Scriabin uses six melodic themes to accomplish this task. He would have developed these six themes first – and we have proof that he did so from a letter he wrote in 1905[45] - and from there developed the orchestration.

He gave each of these themes a title, which he wrote into the score, and it is no coincidence that the titles are the same as the six programmatic themes discussed earlier. He wished that the melodic themes, like the written themes, represent the five components of the "joy of creative activity."

Here are presented the six melodies that I have pulled from the score. Below each staff is the correlating programmatic theme. I have also included the snippets

---

[45] In a letter to his second wife Tatyana, Scriabin writes, "I am changing the second theme of the poem for another more passionate one. It is exceptionally beautiful and broad (Bowers. *Scriabin.* Pg.128)." From this statement one can extrapolate that all five themes –though they may not have been set in stone – were completed before July 3rd of 1905 when the letter was written. This is an important fact to note because it tells us that the musical themes were developed first and then everything else (textures, orchestration, structure, etc.) was most likely developed from there, not vice versa.

from the poetry that might help illustrate what Scriabin was picturing when he created the melodies.

"Strife after the ideal" - "spirit…on the summit of negation…dwells in languor…ready to sink into oblivion."[46]

"Awakening of the soul" – "Spirit playing, Spirit caressing…It is transported, it tittups, Dances and whirls…It is tormented, wearied."[47]

"Spirit in flight" – "Bright presentiments of shing rhythms awake within it. Sweet moment!"[48]

"Human love" – "Spirit, fully delighted…plays the struggle of love…combining opposing desires in single awareness, one love."[49]

---

[46] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.131
[47] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.131
[48] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132
[49] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132

"Will to rise" –"It pierces the dark abysses with glowing glances, it shouts with rage and fury…the battle blazes."[50]

"Creative force"– "Spirit, playing, changing, vibrates the universe, explaining, affirming…It was victorious, It was triumphant!... ALAS! IT HAS ATTAINED ITS PURPOSE."[51]

Each musical interpretation is quite spectacular. It is here that the true genius of Scriabin shines through. Through the contours and rhythms we can see how Scriabin truly imagined his thematic ideas. The melody representing "strife after the ideal" seems to jump in frustration as the flute dips down a minor 6th and then up a minor 6th, yet it still seems to remain stagnant for the voice consistently returns back to B. With "awakening of the soul," where the creative process has begun, the clarinet shows to be more conscious as it slowly fights against gravity to climb up an octave. Perhaps the most beautiful is the last melody representing the "creative force." Here the trumpet insistently ascends in a series of perfect fourths reaching higher and higher as the creative mind discovers its full potential, its "purpose."

After forming these six melodies and placing them in their appropriate place, Scriabin began developing the supporting material. As would be expected for a contrapuntal work, many of the accompanimental passages are melodic in nature.

---

[50] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132
[51] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.132

These secondary melodies, as unique as they may sound, are actually derivations of one of the original six. As I stated earlier, Scriabin forms his entire symphonic poem much like one would approach a fugue, developing thematic material and then manipulating it in various ways to create layers of new melodies that complete the score. Of course there are some portions of the instrumentation that are purely accompanimental, but these are rather intermittent in comparison to *The Isle of the Dead.*

Scriabin's manipulation comes from a set of techniques familiar to all accomplished composers. These techniques include "cannon imitation, inversion, retrograde inversion, augmentation, diminution, and contrary motion."[52] Scriabin would use one or a combination of these to form a new and unique melody independent of its parent. Aside from these methods of alteration, he might also have simply used fragments of the themes much like Rachmaninoff used fragments of the *Dies Irae*. Below is an excerpt from Scriabin's score. We can see the main melodic component, the various derivations, and a few instruments providing accompaniment. The passages within the colored boxes are melodies specifically derived from the theme representing "strife after the ideal." The clarinet plays the original unaltered theme. The violins and violas are the only instruments playing purely accompanimental passages.

---

[52] Bowers. *New Scriabin.* Pg.129

James Baker scrupulously analyzes the entire score, just as I have done above, and determines the origins of each and every melody. One the following page I have reproduced a portion of a table that illustrates his results.

Poem of Esctasy Op. 54: Form[53]

Measures		Derivation	T	Motives	Comments
Exposition (mm. 1-180)					
1-38	A1a (1) 1-6			a_1	flute
	(2) 6-10				violin
	(3) 11-13				piccolo
	b	13-19		a_2	trumpet
	2a	19-27		a_3(mm.19-23)	clarinet I
				a_1(mm.22-27)	clarinet II
				a_4(mm.22-27)	oboe
				a_5(mm.23-27)	flute
	b	27-38	A2a	5	but extended
				a_3(mm.27-30)	flute
				a_1(mm.30-38)	clarinet I
				a_4(mm.30-38)	oboe
				a_5(mm.31-38)	flute
39-70	B1a (1)(a)	39-40		b_3,a_3	
	(b)	41-42		b_2,a_1	
	(2)(a)	43-44			compare B1a(1)(a)
	(b)	45-46			compare B1a(1)(b)
	b	47-54	B1a	2	
	2a (1)(a)	55		b_1,a_1	
	(b)	56		b_2,a_1	
	(c)	57-58		b_3	
	(2) 59-62	B2a(1)	0		m.62 differs m.58
	(3) 63-66	B2a(1)	11		
	b	67-70	B2a(1)	10	extension
71-95	C1a (1) 71-75			c_1,c_2	
	(2) 75-78				begins like C1a, T_{11}
	b (1) 79-83	C1a(1)	4	c_1,c_3	
	(2)(a)	83-85	C1a(1)	0	c_1,c_3	
	(b)	85-87			c_1,c_3	extension, continued
	c	87-95	C1	5	c_{1a},c_{1b},c_3	m.87
			C1	10		m.91, c_3 comes to fore
95-110	D1	95-102		d_1,a_2 (T_7)	
	2a	102-06		d_{1-4}	
	b	106-10	D2a	5	melody only
110-80	E1a (1)	110-13		e_1,a_1	
	(2)	114-17			
	b	118-26	E1a	0	parts inverted
	2a	127-36		e_2,e_3	e_3 canonic treatment
	b	137-40		e_3	
	1c	140-47	E1b	2	
	1d (1) 148-51	E1a	2		
	(2) 152-55			e_4	
	1e (1) 156-59	E1a(1)	4		or E1d(1), T_2
	(2)(a)	160-63	E1d(2)	2	
	(b)	164-68	E1e(2)(a)	2	

[53] Baker. Pg. 218

For now let us just focus on the fourth column that represents all melodic content found within the piece. Here we see a series of letters from a to e which have subscripts from 1 up to 5. Each of the five letters represents one of the themes as discussed above. For simplicity's sake Baker has chosen to use letters instead of the written titles. The subscripts that follow the letters represent derivatives of the themes. The letters with a subscript of 1 are the original unaltered themes. So a_2 is a theme derived from the original a_1 using one of the techniques discussed earlier. Scriabin may have further altered a_2 to produce a_3 or reverted back to a_1 and altered the original in a new way to produce a_3. With that said it is very evident that all motivic material for the entire symphonic poem is based on or derived from a_1, b_1, c_1, d_1, e_1, the original melodic themes. This fact underscores how important the themes were in developing the piece as a whole. They are essentially the foundation from which everything else was developed.

As we imagine Scriabin creating each of his derivations and placing them within the work, we can assume he simultaneously developed the textures and harmonic structure. I say simultaneously because, as demonstrated with the previous example extracted from the score, it is the layers of melodies that primarily produce the textures as well as the harmonies. To create such a contrapuntal collage of instruments would have taken a great deal of finessing. Scriabin deserves a great deal of credit for accomplishing this so effectively.

James Baker is one of the few Scriabin critics who chooses to leave behind the composer's philosophical life and focus purely on the content of the music. He spends

the span of his book picking apart in every which way the numerous layers of music. He produces interesting results that exemplify the fecundity of the score. Yet he never takes a step further to draw a parallel between his purely logistical analysis and Scriabin's philosophical thought process. This is understandable, for his analysis does not produce a clear opportunity to do so. For instance his table above, as much as it helps us understand the music, offers little insight into the program of the music. It seems to me that any attempt to draw a tie from the table above to the "creative process" would be farfetched. Baker may expose the extraordinary complexities of the music, but if anything discounts the relevancy of the programmatic element.

The harmonic language in *The Poem of Ecstasy* is its most unique and complicated feature. When the work was debuted, it contained a harmonic vocabulary that had never been heard before. So daring it was that it left even Prokofiev in "bewilderment at not understanding a note of it."[54] Commonly, critics categorize Scriabin's works into three periods. *The Poem of Ecstasy* is placed into the middle group of "transitional works," works that stand between his tonal earlier period and his final period of atonality. This, though as simple as it may be, is a good way of understanding the harmonic structure. It is half way between tonality and atonality. Baker goes on to explain how the tonal plan moves in "progressions of tritones and descending fifths,"[55] but, when simplified based on a Schenker analysis, actually contains "harmonies closely related to the C major tonic." The furthest that Scriabin

---

[54] Bowers. *The New Scriabin.* Pg.189
[55] Baker. Pg.224

ever moves from the tonic of C is in the development or middle section of the work. (And it is typical for most composers, Mozart and Beethoven for instance, to deviate from the tonic key at this point in the music.) He moves to E-flat and returns back to C in the recapitulation or final section of the piece. It is probably no coincidence that in the development, when the "spirit" fully discovers its "creative force," the composer moves up to E-flat, a key that is considered – probably because it most easily accessible to brass instruments – to be heroic and dominating. Beethoven's *Heroica Symphony* and his *Emperor Concerto*, along with Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero's Life),* are all in the key of E-flat.

Though its spontaneous jumps from one idea to the next might lead one to believe otherwise, Scriabin's work actually follows standard sonata-form with only minimal deviations. If we divide the work into three sections, we see that each has the necessary material to be one of the three sections of sonata-form, the exposition, the development, and the recapitulation. Below I have reproduced the first column of Baker's table discussed earlier. This column, which he uses to map out the piece, divides the music into several smaller sections based on their material content. Each lettered section contains correlating thematic material; within section A we should expect to find motives a_1-a_5, within section B motives b_1-b_3. Surprisingly James Baker never discusses his sectional divisions and how they match very well the standard structure of sonata-form. As demonstrated below, encasing and labeling the various sections is pretty simple given the work he has already accomplished.

36

Left column:

Exposition (mm. 1-151)

1-38	A1a(1)	1-6
	(2)	6-10
	(3)	11-13
	b	13-19
	2a	19-27
	b	27-28
39-70	B1a(1)(a)	39-40
	(b)	41-42
	(2)(a)	43-44
	(b)	45-46
	b	47-54
	2a(1)(a)	55
	(b)	56
	(c)	56-59
	(2)	59-62
	(3)	63-66
	b	67-70
71-95	C1a(1)	71-75
	(2)	75-78
	b(1)	79-83
	(2)(a)	83-85
	(b)	85-87
	c	87-95
95-110	D1	95-102
	2a	102-06
	b	106-10
110-80	E1a(1)	110-13
	(2)	114-17
	b	118-26
	2a	127-36
	b	137-40
	1c	140-47
	1d(1)	148-51
	(2)	152-55
	1e(1)	156-59
	(2)	152-55
	1e(1)	156-59
	(2)(a)	160-63
	(b)	164-68
	1f(1)	168-71
	(2)	172-75
	(3)	176-80

Labels: *Primary Theme*, *Transition*, *Secondary Theme*, *Closing Theme*, *Codetta*

Development (mm. 181-313)

181-213	D3a	181-84
	b(1)(a)	185-86
	(b)	187-88
	(2)(a)	189-90
	(b)(1)	191-92
	(2)	193-94
	(3)	195-96
	c(1)	196-200
	(2)(a)	200-04
	(b)	205-06
	(3)(a)	207-09
	(b)	209-211
	(c)	211-213
213-24	4a(1)	213-14
	(2)	215-16
	b	217-20
	c	221-24
225-60	5a(1)(a)	225-29
	(2)(a)	229-32
	(b)	232-36
	(c)	237-38
	b(1)(a)	239-43
	(b)	243-44
	(2)(a)	245-47
	(b)(1)	247-49
	(2)	249-51
	(3)	251-52
	(4)	252-53
	(c)(1)(a)	253-54
	(b)	254-55
	(2)	256-59
	(3)	259-60

Label: *No Structure*

Right column:

260-96	6a(1)	260-64
	(2)	264-68
	b(1)(a)	269-72
	(b)(1)	273-74
	(2)	275-76
	(c)	277-80
	(d)	280-85
	c	285-88
	b(2)(a)	289-92
	(b)	293-96
297-313	7a(1)(a)(1)	297
	(2)	298
	(b)	299-300
	(2)(a)	301-302
	(b)	303-04
	b	305-13

Recapitulation (mm. 313-605)

314-340	A3a(1)	313-17
	(2)	317-20
	b	321-29
	c	329-40
341-76	B3a	342-48
	b(1)	349-52
	(2)(a)	353
	(b)	354
	(c)	355
	(d)	356
	4a	357-68
	b	369-76
377-84	C2a	377-84
	b	385-96
	c(1)(a)	397-98
	(b)	399-400
	(2)(a)	401-02
	(b)	403-04
405-34	D8a(1)	405
	(2)	406-08
	b(1)	409-12
	(2)	413
	9a	415-18
	b(1)	419-22
	(2)(a)	423-24
	(b)(1)	425
	(2)	426
	c(1)	427-30
	(2)	431-34
435-47	A4a	435-38
	b	439-42
	c	443-47
447-76	D10	447-68
	11	468-76
477-86	E3a(1)	477-78
	(2)	479-80
	(1)	481-82
	b	483-86
487-506	D12	487-90
	13a	490-94
	b	494-98
	a	499-502
	c	502-06
507-30	E4a(1)	507-08
	(2)(a)	509-10
	(b)	511-12
	b(1)	513-14
	(2)(a)	515-16
	(b)	517-18
	5	519-30
531-605	D14a(1)(a)	531-32
	(b)	533-34
	(2)(a)	535-36
	(b)	537-38
	(3)	539-40
	b(1)	541-46
	(2)	547-53
	D15	553-605

Labels: *Primary Theme*, *Transition*, *Secondary Theme*, *Closing Theme*, *Coda*

There is no finessing required to fit the two structures together. Scriabin only deviates from the expected sonata structure when he repeats several thematic passages at the end of the recapitulation. James Baker, among other critics, labels this section as the epilogue. In the context of the sonata-form this might better be labeled as the coda.

It is more difficult to find insight within the larger layout of the piece than it was with *The Isle of the Dead.* Obviously he placed the themes, both within the exposition and recapitulation, in logical order beginning with "strife after the ideal" and ending with "creative force." In the coda the composer wavers between the last two themes before finally settling on the triumphant "creative force." In the very last portion of the section, which Bowers labels specifically as the "coda of weariness,"[56] the "creative force" develops unexpectedly to establish itself as the ultimate and final victor. Here, where the "creative process" has been accomplished, "all color disappears…only volume remains."[57]

Conclusion

For two men who began with such similar lives, we would have trouble finding any two composers who show such unique, differing qualities. *The Poem of Ecstasy* and *The Isle of the Dead* are two works that illustrate this point. In each we find two very different compositional approaches, and more importantly, we see the consequences that each method produced. In *The Isle of the Dead*, the listener finds

---

[56] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.136
[57] Bowers. *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Pg.136

exactly what he would expect to find in a symphonic poem. That is a complete and coherent story with a unified theme that is comprised of several smaller images and musical illustrations. Scriabin, however, gives the listener little of this, aside from some melodic allusions here and there. His end result is beautiful music that surely has meaning, but, as with the entire Scriabin oeuvre, the listener has difficulty interpreting what the meaning might be.

Simplicity is the key. This is what we learn from *The Isle of the Dead.* Rachmaninoff begins with an unadorned painting as a subject, a painting likely well-known by the cultured listener. From there the composer forms simple thoughts about life and death that are easily transmitted through the music. He ingeniously takes the listener through a story that has a beginning, middle and end. Although there are some points in the music that are open for multiple interpretations, Rachmaninoff overall presents unambiguous ideas. The music seems driven by one prevailing message, that over life "death is the ultimate victor."[58] The majority of the work is spent reiterating this point with ever strengthening assertions.

The listener has trouble following Scriabin from the very beginning. The program carries with it a great deal of baffling material. The "creative process" is partially defined by the smaller themes that comprise the six stages. These we can fathom. But the other, more confusing, half of this journey comes from the composer's mysticism and his musical talent that "would bring about the transformation of the

---

[58] Norris. Pg.103

world…and return it to original Oneness."[59] His thoughts within this sphere are very mysterious to us, and although they probably made logical sense in the eyes of Scriabin, to the listener they do not. To make any claims about how these ideas are placed within the music of any of Scriabin's works is an unrealistic stretch.

The only solid material within the symphonic poem, the six themes, Scriabin develops in methods that do not provide the audience with any valuable information about the program, or at least any information that can be deciphered. James Baker certainly illustrates the quality to which Scriabin manipulates the melodies to develop beautiful contrapuntal collages that make up the majority of the score, but Baker never ties his findings to the program. This is likely because he cannot.

The cunning use of sonata form in *The Poem of Ecstasy* is Scriabin's play on a centuries-old structure that he makes his own. It, too, deserves homage, but not for its programmatic qualities. Notes we can take from the progression of musical events are limited. That "creative force" is the final and prevailing step in the "creative process" is about all that can be extrapolated.

Both symphonic poems are now celebrating their one-hundredth birthday. The last century has roused a great deal of discussion regarding both works. The literature produced to this day validates my point. Discussion of *The Isle of the Dead* revolves around nothing but the programmatic element. Martyn, Norris, Piggott and Serof all approach the work with focus on the program. Literature on *The Poem of Ecstasy*, however, centers itself on the unique harmonic qualities and melodic content. Of the

---

[59] Bowers. *The New Scriabin.* Pg.63

more famous Scriabin writers, Schloezer is the only one who attempts to validate the program. (And might I add, Schloezer was a dear friend and loyal fan of Scriabin who never cast a single word of criticism in the span of his 300-page biography.) Most others acknowledge Scriabin's philosophical thoughts and acknowledge their influence on the music, but never try to decode, beyond a few small attempts, the enigmatic program within any of his pieces. A harmonic analysis is more worth a critic's time in this case. Faubion Bowers, a critic whose assertions I often find akin to my own, spends intermittent portions of his two books elucidating Scriabin's compositional thought process. In each attempt he seems to reach only a certain point in depth before resigning to another more lucid topic. "Heady, solipsistic stuff, all this,"[60] he explains.

---

[60] Bowers. *The New Scriabin.* Pg.63.

Terminology

Minor/Major Keys – Any piece of tonal music will generally be in either a major key
or a minor key. If in a major key the piece will overall sound happy. A good
example would any basic Christmas carol like *Jingle Bells*. If a piece is in a
minor key the mood will be more somber or darker. A good example would be
Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. A piece, such as *The Isle of the Dead*, may
have multiple key signatures which means that the piece may fluctuate
between major and minor.

Program – In the context of symphonic poems, we refer to the narrative that the
composer develops within the music as the program. The program may contain
several layers and may be open for interpretation. In *The Isle of the Dead*,
Rachmaninoff creates part of the program by simply describing the scene from
the painting. However, he also takes it a step further, and continues the story
that Böcklin puts in place. At times, he departs from the dark mood of the
painting, and instead describes ephemeral images of life. All of these together
comprise the program of *The Isle of the Dead.*

Sonata Form – Developed in the early 18th century, sonata form is a set structure that
is often applied to the first movement of multi-movement works. The layout is
shown below. There are three parts. There is the exposition, which contains the
themes shown in the diagram. There is the development and then the
recapitulation, which is essentially a repeat of the exposition. It is important to
note that many composers chose to use this predetermined form yet also apply
their own alterations. For example one could add an introduction or choose to
eliminate the closing theme. If desired one could switch the closing theme and
the primary theme in the recapitulation. If the sonata form is used by a
composer it does not need to be followed exactly.

Exposition

Primary Theme – Transition – Secondary Theme – Closing Theme

Development

This section is free in structure and is left to the composer to layout. It will often
contain fragments of the previous themes introduced in the exposition.

Recapitulation

Primary Theme – Transition – Secondary Theme – Closing Theme

Symphonic Poem – It was in Franz Liszt's 1854 public performance of *Tasso,
Lamento e Trionfo,* a symphonic work that depicted the life of 16th century

Italian poet Torquato Tasso, that the composer coined the term *Symphonic Poem*, introducing a new genre into the classical music vocabulary. Today we define a symphonic poem as a work for orchestra, generally in one movement, that acts as a musical narrative in developing a specified program. This program could stem from a story, a character, an image/picture, or a poem. Often the works from which the program is derived are the products of other artists. Liszt's *Faust*, for instance, took its extra-musical program from Johann von Goethe's tragic play also entitled *Faust*. Yet we will also see that, at times, the program may be the creation of the composer himself. Richard Strauss created *Tod und Verklärung (Death and Transfiguration)* based on his own ideas about death.

Bibliography

Baker, James. (1986) *The Music of Alexander Scriabin.* Yale University Press.

Bertensson, Sergei; Leyda, Jay. (1956) *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music.* New York: New York University Press.

Bowers, Faubion. (1973) *The New Scriabin: Enigmas and Answers.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Bowers, Faubion. (1969) *Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer.* Volume Two. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd.

Haylock, Julian. (1996) *Sergei Rachmaninoff: An Essential Guide to his Life and Works.* London: Pavilion Books.

Martyn, Barrie. (1990) *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor.* London: Scolar Press.

Niecks, Frederick. (1969) *Programme Music in The Last Four Centuries.* New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd.

Norris, Geoffrey. (1976) *The Master Musicians: Rachmaninoff.* New York: Schirmer Books.

O'Connell, Charles. (1941) *The Victor Book of the Symphony: Revised Edtion.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

O'Connell, Charles. (1950) *The Victor Book of Overtures, Tone Poems and Other Orchestral Works.* New York: Simon and Schuster

Piggott, Patrick. (1974) *BBC Music Guides: Rachmaninov Orchestral Music.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Riesemann, Oskar Von. (1934) *Rachmaninoff's Recollections.* New York: the MacMillan Company

Schloezer, Boris De. (1987) *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Seroff, Victor. (1951) *Rachmaninoff.* London: Cassel and Company Ltd.