

Scriabin, Roslavets, and the Path to Post-Tonality

Anna Ferenc

The repertoire on this recording features a unique sampling of the transition from tonal to post-tonal expression as it developed in Moscow in the piano music of Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) and Nikolai Roslavets (1881-1944). The pairing of these two composers may be a novel idea, but it is long overdue and illustrates a connection between their compositions that has been overlooked.

Scriabin and Roslavets were contemporaries, but their individual lives could not have been more different. Scriabin was born into an aristocratic Moscow family, had access from a young age to the best formal music training available, completed studies at the Moscow Conservatory at 20, and enjoyed recognition as a brilliant concert pianist and innovative composer during his lifetime and after his untimely death. Roslavets came from a rural background outside of Russia proper, taught himself to play the violin as a youngster and then obtained enough formal training to enter the Moscow Conservatory at the age of 21, fell into political disfavour along with many modernist artists after the Russian Revolution, but has begun to regain recognition since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

One consequence of these different life circumstances is that the professional careers of these two composers overlapped by a very short period of time as Roslavets launched his in 1913, only two years before Scriabin's death. Another is that their respective repertoires are aligned with different aesthetic philosophies: Scriabin's compositions are linked with Mysticism, while Roslavets' are associated with Constructivism. Nevertheless, the music of these two composers is connected by a common concept, that being the synthetic chord.

The most famous synthetic chord is Scriabin's "chord of *Prometheus*", so-coined in 1910 by the composer's friend and biographer, Leonid Sabaneyev, to name a recurring harmonic structure, often identified as a complex altered dominant chord, in Scriabin's tone-poem *Prometheus*. This symphonic composition articulates an important turning point in Scriabin's oeuvre marking the end of his Romantic tonal expression and the beginning of a conscious search for compositional means by which to transform human consciousness through ecstatic experiences of artistic synthesis. Scriabin developed such a theurgic intension under the influence of Theosophy and mystic Symbolism. His attempt to achieve it musically resulted in a very personal post-tonal idiom, which materialized only in his piano music.

To illustrate the transition from tonal to post-tonal contexts, there are pre- and post-*Promethean* works featured on this recording. Scriabin's Sonata No. 2 and his Two Poems, Op. 32 are pre-*Promethean*. The Sonata was written between 1892 and 1897 and its two movements reflect the predominant stylistic influence of Chopin in Scriabin's music at that time. Energetic rhythms are counterbalanced by lyric

melodic lines performed with a rubato integral to the Romantic style. Tonal ambiguity in this piece undergoes chromatic expansion in the Two Poems written in 1903. Despite the presence of key signatures, the beginnings of both pieces are far removed from their respective tonalities, but such dissonances are resolved at ends of phrases or by the end of each piece.

The remaining two works by Scriabin on this disk are post-*Promethean*. The Three Etudes completed in 1912 are devoid of key signature and resist a conventional tonal focus. True to the genre of the Etude, these pieces require mastery of pianistic technique, but not of the traditional kind. The first piece is a study of the pianist's ability to play a right-hand melody in parallel major ninths, the second in parallel major sevenths, and the third in parallel fifths. Scriabin's Five Preludes, Op. 74, written in 1914, are his final pieces and represent the pinnacle of his post-tonal exploration characterized by a weak sense of pulse and the ambiguity of the tritone ever present in variations of referential harmonies or synthetic chords that transform purposeful musical direction into a contemplative stasis.

Following in Scriabin's compositional footsteps, Roslavets developed a similar synthetic chord practice and his link to Scriabin is illustrated all the more on this recording by the inclusion of compositions bearing identical titles to those of his predecessor. Like Scriabin's mystic chord, Roslavets' referential harmonies also resemble complex altered dominant chords although they are often not as symmetrically constructed. One could say that Roslavets picked up where Scriabin left off and developed a synthetic chord practice to suit his own post-tonal purposes.

Keeping in mind that Roslavets was a violinist, his skilful writing for the piano is remarkable and his compositions for this medium at times echo Scriabin's pianistic style. However, harmonic succession is more clearly audible in his music, though it is not goal directed. Instead, his harmonies are combined with distinct motivic gestures that recur in transpositional juxtaposition musically analogous to the architectonic design of non-representational Constructivist art. In his mature synthetic chord practice exemplified in his Two Poems completed in 1920 and his Five Preludes written between 1919 and 1922, he included a harmonic pedal indication in his scores that clearly illustrates his musical building blocks for the performer to follow.

Roslavets was captivated by rhythmic as well as harmonic innovation and his earlier compositions feature intense experimentation within both musical parameters. Dating from 1916, his second Sonata is a single-movement work that combines cross-rhythms with frequent meter and tempo changes to articulate playful scherzo-like moments and a sombre slow-movement reference all within the structure of sonata form. His Three Etudes written in 1914 are studies in rhythmic contortion within unconventional meters. These rhythmic challenges are embedded in dense harmonic and motivic textures that require up to four staves for their notation and render these pieces among the most difficult in the piano repertoire.

Roslavets claimed compositional independence from Scriabin and his attempt in the 1920s to distance himself from his predecessor's mystic preoccupation is understandable in light of new ideological requirements in his own time. Nevertheless, as demonstrated on this recording, his synthetic chord practice builds upon the musical innovation of Scriabin to chart a distinctly unique path from tonal to post-tonal music within the modernist context of the early twentieth century.

© 2011 Anna Ferenc