

Skrjabin's Magical Music: Just a Fantasy?

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Abstract. This article deals with the magical power attributed to music in the text of the *Preparatory Act*, by the Russian composer and pianist Aleksandr Skrjabin (1872-1915). The “leitmotif” of magical music can also be found in the myth of Orpheus, and in this article we discuss whether the contents of the *Preparatory Act* can be considered mythical or fantastic.

Keywords: Skrjabin, *Preparatory Act*, magical music.

[es] La música mágica de Scriabin: ¿solamente una fantasía?

Resumen. Este artículo examina el poder mágico atribuido a la música en el texto del *Acto preparatorio*, del compositor y pianista ruso Aleksandr Skrjabin (1872-1915). Ese motivo central (la música mágica) se halla también en el mito de Orfeo, y en este trabajo nos preguntamos si el contenido de dicho texto puede ser considerado mítico o fantástico.

Palabras clave: Scriabin, *Acto preparatorio*, música mágica.

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*To the memory of Aleksey Fëdorovič Losev (1893-1988),
philosopher and classical philologist,
survivor of the Silver Age,
student of Skrjabin's thought.*

1. Introduction²

In the early stages of his career, the Russian composer and pianist Aleksandr Nikolaevič Skrjabin (1872-1915) was considered a romantic artist along the lines of Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, and Wagner. From 1903 onwards, however, and as his

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intellectual curiosity in philosophy and theosophy grew, Skrjabin quickly developed a highly innovative style - especially in the field of harmony, which put him at the forefront of musical modernism (cf. Schloezer, Macdonald, Bowers, Kelkel, and Verdi). Around 1902, Skrjabin began drafting a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) which would ultimately be entitled *Mysterium* and involve not only music, poetry, drama, and dance (which could remind us of the musical dramas by Wagner, whom Skrjabin admired), but also coloured lights, flavours, caresses, and tastes.³ Undaunted in the face of his own unbridled fantasies, the composer planned to gather all humankind for the première of his *Mysterium* in a temple built on a lake in India, where the limits between performers and audience would disappear, with everyone taking part in the action (Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 34-5, 95-6; Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 249; Schloezer 127, and Morrison 195 and 197). Thus, a purifying ecstasy would surface, leading to the dissolution of the universe and humankind in their current material states, and to their transformation and elevation to a higher level in the hierarchy of being.⁴

Whatever Skrjabin's achievements might have been with such a visionary project, they would always have fallen short of the composer's grandiose goals. In 1913, Skrjabin began composing a *Preparatory Act* (*Предварительное действие*, in Russian), not only as an introduction, but also as a summary of what the whole *Mysterium* would be (Шлецер 102 and 114; Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 103-5; Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 197-8 and 249, and Schloezer, 207-18). Skrjabin wrote a first version of the libretto for the *Preparatory Act* in the summer of 1914, and by year-end, had read it aloud for his friends, the Symbolist poets Vjačeslav Ivanov, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, and Konstantin Bal'mont. Perhaps following the suggestions of such qualified listeners, the composer started a second, revised version that remained unfinished at his untimely death in 1915 (Шлецер 102-3; Bowers 2: 253-4; Kelkel 225-6, and Verdi 72 and 138).⁵ The basis of this article will be the first version of the *Preparatory Act*, which - despite not being the definitive one - is the only one that presents the 'narratives' we will be addressing here - namely those which can represent a return, under a new guise, of the myth of Orpheus' magical music.⁶

³ Cf. Сабанеев (*Скрябин* 85-97), and Morrison (190-2 and 194). Despite Skrjabin's admiration for Wagner (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 119-20 and 238-9; Морозова 48, and Энгель 51) and the latter's influence on Skrjabin's harmony, orchestration, and self-perception, the respective composers' artistic goals differed (Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 255; Энгель 56, and Schloezer 49-51). Generally speaking, Skrjabin did not want his *Mysterium* to be represented, but rather enacted (Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 34-5 and 88, about the *Preparatory Act*; cf. also Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 186-7; Schloezer 124-31, and Morrison 197).

⁴ About Skrjabin's *Mysterium*, cf. Сабанеев ("Прометей..." 287-8), Сабанеев (*Скрябин* 12-3, 37-84, 97-103, and 228-9), Энгель (50, 56, 67, 71, and 88-92), Riesemann (11-19), Сабанеев (*Воспоминания* 24, 51-3, 67, 95-6, 99, 124-8, 139-40, 142-3, 173-5, 186-7, 198-9, 239-40, 249-51, 266, 271, 310-5, and 329-30), Schloezer (121-206), Scriabine ("Introduction" 14 and 17), Bowers (2: 49-50), quoting Энгель (56-7); Морозова (49 and 54), Kelkel (225-6 and 351), Morrison 184-241; Килина (173, for whom Scriabin conceived his *Mysterium* in 1907-8), and Verdi (66, 72, 126, 128-42, 190, and 319). In his p. 131, Verdi quotes p. 150 of the German version of Сабанеев ("Прометей..."); but the actual citation is Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 175.

⁵ Skrjabin revised just the first 425 verses of his first version. The original Russian text of the second, revised version of the *Preparatory Act* can be found in *Скрябин* (235-47); cf. Bowers (2: 271-6) and Morrison (313-26).

⁶ The original Russian text of the first version of the *Preparatory Act* can be found in *Скрябин* (202-35). So far as we know, there are no full translations of the first version of the *Preparatory Act* into English; instead of ll. 1-425 of the first version, Morrison (313-26) translated the text of the second, revised version (having 332 verses), followed by the text of the first one from l. 426 (Morrison 326-47). Here we shall follow the verse numbering of the first version.

In his *Preparatory Act*, Skrjabin presented the spirit's descent into matter, and the return of both to unity (Шлецер 114).⁷ The process would involve the origin of the universe, the birth of the male and female principles (represented by the Wave and Lightning images), the birth of creatures and humankind, the fall of humankind into the abyss of evil, and the intervention of a 'prophet' whose sacrifice brings a liberating truth to humankind (Ровнер 27-9).

As we aim to show in this article, Skrjabin, quite modestly, identified - at least in part - with the said prophet.⁸ We shall, in due course, examine the extent of similarities between Skrjabin and the prophet in the *Preparatory Act*. At this point, though, we can say that the liberation, carried out by the new "messiah" Skrjabin thought himself to be, would consist in leading humankind and the entire universe to a purifying ecstasy and an immaterial state of being by means of the artwork to which the *Preparatory Act* would be the introduction (Скрябин 154; Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 3-4, 49, 57, and 88; Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 140 and 212, and Molina-Moreno, "Scriabin y el misticismo..." 220, and "Scriabin and Plato's..." 22). Yearning for that ontological transformation of the universe and humankind to be accomplished through art,⁹ Skrjabin was placing himself - perhaps even consciously - above Orpheus, who through his music - according to the sources about him in ancient Greek and Roman literature and art - also exerted a magical influence over nature, humankind, and the gods.¹⁰

In the last section of this article, we will examine whether Skrjabin's conception about magical music can, *stricto sensu*, be considered a myth, or just a fantasy. To do so, we will be using one of the most complete and comprehensive definitions of myth known to us - namely, the one proposed by Losada. This definition is particularly useful when seeking to differentiate between myth and fantasy (something Losada sought to do in one of the most recent studies on the issue).

2. Sound in Skrjabin's cosmogony and cosmology

The *Preparatory Act* begins with a cosmogony and a cosmology (ll. 1-430, in Скрябин 202-15, and Morrison 313-26), according to which "the whole poem of creation" was contained in an initial burst or thunder, in a fiery breathing (ll. 5-8, in Скрябин 202, and Molina-Moreno, "Scriabin and Plato's..." 22):

Въ этомъ взлѣтѣ, въ этомъ взрывѣ 5
 Въ этомъ молнийномъ порывѣ
 Въ огневомъ его дыханьи
 Вся поэма мірозданья.

⁷ Сабанеев (*Воспоминания* 123) remembers a talk in which Skrjabin attributed the same "programme" to his symphonic poem *Prometheus, the Poem of Fire*.

⁸ Skrjabin even established analogies between Jesus Christ and himself, on the basis that he was born on December 25th, according to the Julian calendar still in use at the time in Russia (Macdonald 51; Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 336; Bowers 2: 49-50, quoting Энгель 56-7, and Килина 166).

⁹ The transformation Skrjabin sought to achieve went far beyond the goals of the main revolutionary movement of his time, namely Marxism. Despite occasional interest in the movement, and having read, known, and frequently spoken with Plekhanov, Skrjabin did not believe in the materialistic foundations of Marxism and was never a convinced Marxist (cf. Verdi 47-50).

¹⁰ About the myth of Orpheus, cf. Riedweg, "Orfeo" and "Orpheus...," Bremmer, 56-8, and, more specifically for the aspects dealt with in this article, Molina-Moreno, "La música..." and "El orfismo..."

Romans - associated the Sun with Apollo, who was imagined ruling the universe with his lyre.¹¹

After those words of the anonymous prophet, promising he would teach humankind the mystery of celestial harmonies, the narrator in the *Preparatory Act* tells how “the people, searching for consonant sonorities, touch the strings that are alien to them” (l. 498, in Скрябин 217, and Morrison 329). Humankind falls into the abyss of evil, described in a section of the poem entitled *Song–Dance of the Fallen Ones* (ll. 581-616, in Скрябин 220-1, and Morrison 331-2). In that passage, the verses 607-8 are especially meaningful (“Пѣснямъ неба, намъ докучнымъ / Наши пѣсни не созвучны,” in Скрябин 221 = “Our songs are not consonant / With the songs of heaven, which are tedious to us,” in Morrison 332). That is an appropriate way to express the conflict between wayward humankind, and the rest of the universe: if, as we had seen, the latter consists of harmonious choirs (l. 63 of the first version), “not to be in harmony” can mean “to disagree”.

In another dialogue with humankind, the prophet describes the universe with sumptuous references to the Pythagorean doctrine of the music of the spheres (ll. 844-59):

Онъ – созерцаніе гармоній
И всеединства міра сновъ 845

А міръ – роскошная симфонія
Его различныхъ голосовъ
Земныя истины созвучныя
А съ ними истины небесъ
Слились въ аккорды полнозвучныя 850
Изъ струнъ исторгнутыхъ чудесъ

Ему грядущія мгновенія
Несутъ созвучій новый строй
Онъ весь – святое упоеніе
Своей божественной игрой 855
И подъ десницею божественной
Послушна каждая струна
На солнце-лирѣ гимнь торжественный
Играетъ пламени волна (Скрябин 228-9).

He¹² is the contemplation of harmony
And of the all-unity of the world of dreams 845

¹¹ On the association or even identification between the Sun and Apollo, cf. Molina- Moreno, *Winged* 147-8 with the notes on pp. 163-4. Apollo appeared playing the cithara already in Homer’s *Iliad*, 1, 602; as for his ruling the universe with his instrument, cf. Molina-Moreno, *Winged* 155-60. Lastly, cf. Proclus, *Hymn to Helios*, ll. 15-23 (and specifically 18-20, to which we will be reverting later in this article).

¹² The pronoun used makes it difficult to determine who is being alluded to here. At first glance in the Russian original, the pronoun “онъ” (= “he”) would seem to refer to the prophet’s own universe (міръ, grammatically masculine in Russian) - the latter alluded to in ll. 840-1; if that is the case, though, “it” would be a more fitting translation. However, the passage seems a bit awkward, since two verses later (846-7), the universe is mentioned again as something contrasted to what is described in ll. 844-5. Perhaps Skryabin had in mind an “alternative” god, distinct from that of established religions; this, however, would then beg the question *why* he wrote “онъ” (= “he” / “it”), instead of the metrically equivalent “божь” (= “god”). Despite being raised as an Orthodox Chris-

And the world is a splendid symphony
of his various voices
Earthly consonant truths
And heavenly truths
Combined in sonorous chords 850
Of wonders emanating from strings

The coming moments
Bring a new order of consonance to him
He is engulfed in holy ecstasy
By his divine playing 855
And each dutiful string
Is under his divine right hand
A flaming wave performs
A solemn hymn on the sun lyre (Morrison 341).

The prophet's statement that his world is contemplation of harmony reminds us that Skrjabin told his friend the Russian musicologist, music critic, composer, and scientist Leonid Leonidovič Sabaneev that the contemplation of harmony was mandatory to achieve dematerialization, and that this was a logical consequence of the principle of unity (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 49, 57, and 99). This, however, begs the question of what "the principle of unity" meant for Skrjabin, exactly. According to Sabaneev:

Его творчество представлялось ему точным подобием мирового процесса—так должно было быть и по его теории. Микрокосм человека отражал в своем творчестве микрокосм мира—и законы были одни и те-же. В этом и был «принцип Единства», который он так любил и в который верил так догматически (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 257-8).

His work seemed to him an exact image of the cosmic process – and had to be so, according to his theory. The microcosm of Man reflected, in his own work, the microcosm of the universe; their laws were identical. The 'principle of unity' lay just in that fact (that principle of unity which he so cherished and so dogmatically believed in [our translation]).¹³

The connection between Skrjabin's longing for dematerialization and for unity can be understood if we remember that, in the cosmogony of the *Preparatory Act*, the genesis of the material world was due to differentiation (Il. 11-2, 143, 503-10¹⁴); so, if primordial unity could be restored, dematerialization would follow. We must

tian and having read the *Bible* (Скрябин 120) assiduously, Skrjabin, was far from "official" Christianity, given the influence of theosophy (Люсов 299 and 301).

¹³ It may seem a bit strange that Sabaneev wrote "microcosm" when he referred to both the human being and the universe, instead of referring to the "microcosm of human beings" and the "macrocosm of the universe"; perhaps we are dealing with a *lapsus calami* here. About Skrjabin's view of the principle of unity, cf. Лобанова (31-5): Skrjabin could owe this concept to Blavatsky's *Secret doctrine* (cf. Blavatsky 157, 299 and 378).

¹⁴ Certain passages in Skrjabin's notebooks show that the composer was well aware of the relationship between creation, differentiation, multiplicity, space, and time; cf. Скрябин (136, 147, 149, 161, and 166-7), Scriabine (*Alexandre...* 12, 27, 29, 44, and 50-2), and Schloezer (136).

Со струны солнце-лирной упаль огневой.
 Онъ блаженно упаль 955
 Какъ звенящій кристалъ
 Какъ сверкающій звукъ
 Полный сладостныхъ мукъ
 И блеститъ какъ топазъ,
 Гіацинтъ, хризопразъ 960
 Какъ карбункуль, опаль,
 Сардоникса кристалъ
 Какъ смарагдъ, маргаритъ
 Халкедонъ, хризолитъ
 Какъ небесный сапфиръ 965
 Какъ ласкающій міръ
 Онъ горитъ, какъ единый всецвѣтный алмазъ
 Этотъ храмъ — наша жизнь, нашъ расцвѣтъ, нашъ экстазъ (Скрябин 232).

The walls of the cathedral burn as hymns to freedom
 And the dazzling row of columns sparkle
 Each stone, as a magical singing star
 Fell from a burning string of the sun lyre.
 It blissfully fell 955
 Like chiming crystal
 Like sparkling sound
 Full of sweet torments
 And they glitter like topaz,
 Hyacinth, chrysoprase, 960
 Like carbuncle, opal,
 Crystal of sardonyx
 Like emerald, margarite
 Chalcedony, chrysolite
 Like heavenly sapphire 965
 Like the caressing world
 It burns, like a single multicolored diamond
 This cathedral—our life, our blooming, our ecstasy (Morrison 344-5).

The whole passage recalls what Skrjabin had anticipated in the preceding parts of the poem: the walls that glow like hymns to freedom (l. 951) bring to mind that - according to l. 428 - the temple would be “like a hymn of light”; we may also remember the prophet’s wish that hymns of glory would resound on the sun lyre (l. 497). Now it seems that all those wishes are coming true. Last, the multi-coloured precious gems with which the temple is being built (ll. 959-65) join all its colours into a “unique, all-coloured diamond,” and the temple is compared with the glowing of that diamond in ll. 967-8. This makes us remember Skrjabin’s longing for a recovered unity of all beings, and the text adds that such a temple is the life, the flower, and the ecstasy of all humankind.

After describing the temple where the final cosmic celebration will take place, the prophet invites humankind to it and to receive a “father” (ll. 969-72) who seems to sing the following verses in which he appears as a liberating deity (ll. 973-1004):

- Я слетѣвший съ небесъ
 Богъ любовныхъ чудесъ. 975
 Не учить, а ласкать
 Душъ воскрыльную рать
 Ихъ позвавший на пиръ!
 Я пришелъ на этотъ мѣръ!
 Каждой жаждѣ въ отвѣтъ
 Приношу я расцвѣтъ. 980
 То не истины гнетъ,
 Къ вамъ свобода грядетъ!
- Я утверждение всеоживляющее,
 Я отрицание всесоздающее
- Раздѣляйтесь, расцвѣтайте, 985
 На высоты взлетайте,
 И побѣду надъ стихіей
 Въ пляскѣ празднуйте священной
 Въ красотѣ Іерархіи
 Въ красотѣ неизрѣченной 990
- Пляска — первая причина
 И суда вершитель правый
 Все содѣлаетъ единой
 И сверкающей державой!
- Кто свѣтлѣе, къ сердцу ближе 995
 Чѣмъ тусклѣе, тѣмъ все ниже
 Кто дерзаетъ въ сокровенный
 Ликъ божественный взглянуть
 Тотъ взлетай, благословенный
 Для того открытый путь! 1000
- Я послѣднее свершеніе
 Я блаженство растворенія
 Я всезвѣздности алмазь
- Я свобода, я экстазь! (Скрябин 232-3)
- I am descended from the heavens
 The god of loving wonders. 975
 Not to teach, but to caress
 The winged army of souls
 Having invited them to the feast
 I came to this world!
 In answer to each craving
 I offer blooming. 980
 Not the oppression of truth,

Freedom will come to you!

I am the all reviving confirmation,
I am the all creating negation

Divide, bloom, 985
Soar to the heights,
Celebrate in sacred dance
In the beauty of the hierarchy
In unspeakable beauty
The victory over the primal state 990

The dance is the first order
And the righteous executor of judgment
Will transform everything into a united
And sparkling kingdom!

He who is brighter is closer to the heart 995
The dimmer, that much lower
He who dares to look
Into the hidden, divine face
Then take wing, blessed one
For you the path is open! 1000

I am the final achievement,
I am the bliss of dissolution
I am the diamond of the galaxy,

I am freedom, I am ecstasy! (Morrison 345-6)

In that fragment, notice that the passage ll. 979-80 (“In answer to each craving / I offer blooming”) can be compared with this note by Skryabin:

Я пришел спасти миръ отъ тирановъ-царей, какъ и отъ тирана-народа. Я принесъ безграничную свободу и справедливость, принесъ полный расцвѣтъ, божественную радость творчества (Скрябин 154).

I have come to save the world from the tyrants-tsars and from the tyrant-people. I have brought boundless freedom and justice to the world, I have brought full blossoming, the divine joy of creation [our translation].

Likewise, the passage ll. 983-4 (“I am the all reviving confirmation, / I am the all creating negation”) can be compared with another passage of Skryabin’s notebooks:

Я создаю каждый мигъ, чтобы отрицать его въ слѣдующій. Я всегда протестъ, всегда желаніе новаго, другого. Я вѣчное отрицаніе прошлаго, я вѣчная любовь, вѣчный расцвѣтъ (Скрябин 158-9)

I create every moment, only to deny it in the next. I am always Protest, always Desire of the new, the other. I am the eternal negation of the past, I am eternal love, the eternal blossoming [our translation].

Those passages suggest that Skrjabin identified himself with the liberating deity of the *Preparatory Act*.¹⁶

If we come back now to the *Preparatory Act*, we see that humankind responds to the prophet's words (in the above quoted ll. 973-1004) enthusiastically (ll. 1005-8, in Скрѣбин 233-4; cf. Morrison 346), and - after a transition - the work concludes with a splendid dematerialization of the world (ll. 1021-42):

Мы, увлеченныя
Смерти видѣніемъ
Мы, увлеченныя
Въ нашемъ движеніи

Зажгись, священный храмъ отъ пламени сердець 1025
Зажгись и стань святымъ пожаромъ
Смѣсись блаженно въ насъ, о сладостный отецъ,
Смѣсись со смертью въ танцѣ яромъ!

Въ этотъ послѣдній мигъ совлеченья
Вбросимъ мы вѣчности нашихъ мгновений 1030
Въ этомъ послѣднѣмъ звучіи лирномъ
Всѣ мы растаемъ въ вихрѣ эфирномъ
Родимся въ вихрѣ!
Проснемся въ небо!
Смѣшаемъ чувства въ волнѣ единой! 1035
И въ блескѣ роскошномъ
Расцвѣта послѣдняго
Являясь другъ другу
Въ красѣ обнаженной
Сверкающихъ душъ 1040
Исчезнемъ...
Растаемъ... (Скрѣбин 234-5).

We are carried away
By the vision of death
We are calmed
In our motion

Ignite, sacred temple from hearts' flame 1025
Ignite and become a sacred fire
Merge blessedly in us, o ravishing father,

¹⁶ According to Morrison (185 and 195, quoting Энгель 90), Skrjabin gave himself the role of the Narrator in the *Preparatory Act*. However, we did not find this in Engel's paper. On the other hand, Skrjabin himself told Sabaneev about his wish to be the conductor for the *Preparatory Act* (Сабаневъ, *Воспоминания* 333).

Merge with death in a heated dance!

In this final moment of divestment
 We will cast off the eternities of our instants 1030
 Into this final lyre consonance
 We will dissolve in the ethereal whirlwind
 We will be born in the whirlwind!

We will awaken in heaven!
 We will merge emotions in a united wave! 1035
 And in the splendid luster
 Of the final flourish
 Appearing to each other
 In the exposed beauty
 Of sparkling souls 1040
 We will disappear...
 Dissolve... (Morrison 347)

As we can see, dematerialization and restoration of primordial unity are linked in the expected end of this world as described in the *Preparatory Act*. But perhaps the most alluring aspect of Skrjabin's eschatology is that, according to l. 1031 of the *Preparatory Act*, dematerialization and ecstasy will be fulfilled in the "final lyre consonance." We believe this lyre is the one identified with the Sun in ll. 497 and 856-9 of the *Preparatory Act*. That is, the universe and humankind, in their current disastrous state, would disappear with the sound of that lyre, or - more precisely: the current state of loss of cosmic harmony would end and be replaced by a new, restored harmony. This makes sense if we remember that, according to l. 5 of both versions of the *Preparatory Act*, the universe had originated with an explosion (Скрябин 202 and 235, and Morrison 313). Opposite to that initial, ill-attuned, chaotic bang, there will be, at the end of the current era, the tuned sound of a lyre, an instrument that, at human level, is a fruit of civilization. Moreover, for the ancient Greeks, the lyre belonged to Apollo, the god of most rational and orderly artistic manifestations. It was also the instrument with which Orpheus calmed storms and wild beasts (cf., on this topic, Molina-Moreno, "La música..." 40-1). It was also this very instrument - endowed with a cosmic dimension through its association with the Sun - which would raise the world and humankind to a higher state in the scale of being.¹⁷

It is obvious that Skrjabin achieved a high degree of logical consistency by placing sound at the core of his cosmogony, cosmology, and eschatology. This can be due not only to his being a musician, but - more specifically - by virtue of being one, Skrjabin wanted sound to have a magical, enchanting power. To support this belief, it was necessary to admit that sound was at the very origin and constitution of the universe, according to a psychological "law" governing magical beliefs: *similia similibus*, similar things are influenced by similar things.¹⁸ Indeed, Sabaneev remem-

¹⁷ Cf. Proclus (fifth century C. E.), *Hymn to Helios*, ll. 18-20: "Apollo, singing inspired songs to the accompaniment of the kithara, calms the great wave of deep-roaring becoming" (cf. Berg 148, 150, and 168-9).

¹⁸ Vid. Combarieu 12, Schneider 141-3, Müller, and Molina-Moreno, "El orfismo..." as well as Иванов 11-2. In particular, Schloezer (164) says that Combarieu's theory on the origins of music being found in magic spells seemed to Skrjabin the confirmation of his own ideas by a scientist who was far-removed from mysticism. Cf. also Сабанеев (Скрябин 30-1 and 38-40), with the critical remarks from Schloezer (166-75).

bers how Skrjabin admired Hans von Bülow's saying "in the beginning was rhythm," which the author of the *Preparatory Act* quickly saw as the world having arisen through rhythm. Moreover, Skrjabin saw in rhythm the basis of all magic, and in music the highest magic.¹⁹

Skrjabin's concern with magic, especially in connection with his *Mysterium*, is also obvious in Sabaneev's memories. For Skrjabin, he wrote, established forms of religious cult were degenerate descendants of what was before, when there was true magic in cult - and Skrjabin wanted to see that magic reborn (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 139; cf. *ibid.*, 333-4; Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 59, 89-92 and 228-30). Indeed, like the poets of his time, Skrjabin sought to use alliteration in his verses in such a way that those very alliterations would act like a spell - like hypnosis (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 291; all this is reminiscent of Baudelaire's statement about the wise use of language being like evocative witchcraft; cf. Baudelaire 165). Likewise, according to Sabaneev, Skrjabin stated that the first theme of his *Ninth Sonata* was neither music nor melody, but "a spell in sounds," and that it could not simply be played; indeed, one had to enchant when playing it (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 161). Moreover, Skrjabin told Sabaneev that he was convinced that with the help of the "light symphony" (that is, his *Prometheus or the Poem of Fire*) it was possible to heal anyone from whatsoever disease (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 239; cf. Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 79, 213, and 228-30). Sabaneev also points out that harmony was the aspect of music where the magic effect Skrjabin sought can most easily be achieved, and that it was namely in the field of harmony that Skrjabin was most innovative (Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 144-5, 187, 190-2, and 213, and *Воспоминания* 323).

4. Skrjabin, the Prophet of the *Preparatory Act*, Orpheus... anybody else?

If we look again at the prophet in the *Preparatory Act*, we will see that he had brought humankind a religious revelation (ll. 492-7); more specifically, he had promised to reveal the mysteries of celestial harmonies to humankind (l. 496). This in turn immediately brings to mind Orpheus, who - according to the Latin grammarian Servius, in his *scholium* to Vergil's *Aeneid*, 6, 645 - had first listened to the harmony of the spheres, and, since there were seven spheres, used a seven-stringed lyre. More generally, Orpheus was held to be the founder of mystery cults (cf. Jiménez San Cristóbal, and Bremmer 55-80).

Conversely, the prophet in the *Preparatory Act* echoes the statements of the composer himself. According to his notes from 1904-5, Skrjabin wanted to captivate the world by means of the marvellous beauty of his work, to attract the world to a divine flight without destiny, to his free play (Скрябин 139 and 146; cf. also Скрябин 191;

¹⁹ Сабанеев (*Воспоминания* 130); cf. the quotation from Hans von Bülow in Walker (175). The primal character of rhythm is also obvious in this note by Skrjabin: "Первое усилие, первый порывъ къ освобожденію есть первая ритмическая фигура времени, первая жизнь, первое сознание, пронизавшее хаосъ и создавшее 2-ю степень (стадію), первую грань" (Скрябин 153), i.e., "The first effort, the first impetus towards liberation, is the first rhythmic figure of time, the first life, the first conscience that went through chaos and that created the second period (the second stage), the first limit." Although there are no clear allusions to rhythm in the cosmogony of the *Preparatory Act*, both versions of the poem mention sound phenomena in ll. 5-12 (Скрябин 202 and 235, and Morrison 313). Cf. also Сабанеев (*Скрябин* 57), Сабанеев (*Воспоминания* 309-10 and 57, where he remembers Skrjabin saying that music bewitches time, and that the creative spirit - through rhythms - brings forth time itself and directs it), and Лобанова (94-9).

Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 75, and Морозова 52). This desire can be connected with Skrjabin's goal of the audience of his *Mysterium* also enacting it.²⁰ Then again, Skrjabin also wrote that the highest power was the power of charm, power without violence, and therefore to destroy the enemy could not give any satisfaction; for our composer, to dominate meant to include in the own self (Скрябин 146). Besides the emphasis on attraction and charm, it is important to note that Skrjabin wished to attract the world to his "free play" - what he called his own creative activity (Скрябин 139-43). Also worth noting is the Russian word «игра», which means both "play" and "music-making on an instrument" (just as it does in the English word, "play"). All this reminds us again of the effects of Orpheus' music on nature, humankind, and the gods (cf. Molina-Moreno, "La música..."). Perhaps without being entirely aware of it, Skrjabin wished to be a new Orpheus: in this connection, Bowers states that Skrjabin got acquainted with ancient Greek myths through the translations of ancient Greek literature by Sergej Trubeckoj and Vladimir Solov'ev (and here, let us not forget Skrjabin's talks with Vjačeslav Ivanov), and that he often alluded to Orpheus and Amphion. As for Orpheus, Bowers' statement is confirmed by Skrjabin's brother-in-law, Boris de Schloezer (Bowers 1: 319; Schloezer 118, 163-6, and Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 7, 11, 18, and especially 38-40, with the critical remarks by Schloezer 166-75; cf. also Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 47 and 98).

Did Skrjabin see himself as the prophet of his *Preparatory Act*? We believe he did - but only in part. Actually, the prophet does not bring about, but only *foresees* dematerialization and ecstasy. Skrjabin's real desire was to elicit that dematerialization - in other words, an ontological transformation of reality (Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 75; Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 116; Морозова 52). That metaphysical revolution is brought about, at the end of the *Preparatory Act*, by a "final lyre consonance" (v. 1031, in *Скрябин* 234; cf. Morrison 347), and, judging from vv. 854-9, one can surmise that a deity in human form is playing that lyre:

Онъ весь – святое упоение
 Своей божественной игрой 855
 И подъ десницею божественной
 Послушна каждая струна
 На солнце-лирѣ гимнь торжественный
 Играетъ пламени волна (Скрябин 229).

He is engulfed in holy ecstasy
 By his divine playing 855
 And each dutiful string
 Is under his divine right hand
 A flaming wave performs
 A solemn hymn on the sun lyre (Morrison 341).

²⁰ Skrjabin could owe this idea of "communal art" to his friend Vjačeslav Ivanov, the Symbolist poet and classical scholar. Deeply influenced by Nietzsche, Ivanov paid special attention to the phenomenon of Dionysian rites, with which he connected that concept of communal art (cf. Лобанова 115-64). This idea interested other artists like Fëdor Kuz'mič Sologub, in Skrjabin's times; cf. Килина 174-5.

It would seem, therefore, that Skrjabin would rather identify himself with that deity than he would with the prophet. As a matter of fact, the end of this world - according to the *Preparatory Act* - coincides with what Skrjabin wanted his *Mysterium* to be. In particular, when our composer wanted the audience to take part in the enactment of the *Mysterium*, that meant not only the suppression of limits and the restoration of primordial unity (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 120), but also the transformation of the entire universe into a work of art or - perhaps better yet - into artistic activity (Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 58; cf. Иванов 31, and Nietzsche's justification of existence and of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon, in Nietzsche 25). In this respect, following a performance of *The Poem of Ecstasy*, an exultant Skrjabin said:

А я, правда, так люблю это праздничное настроение после концерта... Никогда не хочется домой, хочется продолжения праздника... хочется, чтобы празднество ширилось, росло, умножалось, чтобы оно стало вечным, чтобы оно захватило мир. Это и есть моя мистерия, когда этот праздник охватит все человечество... (Сабанеев, *Воспоминания* 77).

I really love this festive mood after the concert... I never want to go back home, I want the celebration to continue... I would like for the celebration to spread, grow, multiply, become eternal, encompass the world. That is my *Mysterium* - when this celebration embraces all humankind [our translation].

Related to that wish of identification between life and art, we must remember that Skrjabin did not want his *Mysterium* to be a performance - no, he wanted it to be an effective enactment of universal ecstasy (Schloezer 124-31; cf. Сабанеев, *Скрябин* 88). Therefore, we can say that the universe's ontological transformation (which Skrjabin sought to achieve through his artwork) was a superhuman feat (cf. Скрябин 191; by the way, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* was among Skrjabin's favourite books; cf. Verdi 37, 105, and 121; Wagner's portentous self-perception also seems to have influenced Skrjabin). A superhuman feat like the one he sought was even greater than those of Orpheus. For Skrjabin, it was a metaphysical revolution, through which he endowed himself with the traits of a mythical hero or deity. Thus, Skrjabin's self-mythification, as we can trace it in the *Preparatory Act* and in the composer's notebooks, represents a return of the myth of Orpheus' magical music, elevated to a new dimension of incredible audacity, consistency, and beauty.

5. Myth or fantasy?

So, given Skrjabin's conception of magical music in the *Preparatory Act*, should we consider it a myth or just fantasy? Here, we shall start from Losada's definition of a myth as an explanatory, symbolic, and dynamic narrative about one or several extraordinary events, referring to persons and to a supernatural reality; further, according to Losada, myth lacks historical evidence, consists of invariable elements that can be reduced to topics and are crisis-bound, show a conflict with an emotional, functional, and ritual character, and involve an absolute beginning and/or end that can be individual or universal (Losada 70).

Since, according to Losada's definition, a myth involves one or several extraordinary events, one might think that magic has excellent potential to turn any narrative into a myth. Skrjabin's *Preparatory Act* certainly meets this requirement, because it addresses the magical power of music. This trait alone, however, is not enough for the *Preparatory Act* to be considered a myth: the magical power of music also appears in fairy tales like the well-known *Pied Piper of Hamelin*. We must, therefore, also take the other elements of the definition into consideration.

It is obvious that the *Preparatory Act* offers a symbolic explanation of the origins of the universe, of humankind, and - more specifically - of the power of music to elicit an ontological transformation of reality. Besides symbolic characters like the personifications of the female and male principles, the plot involves actual people, and can be reduced to topics (mythemes) that reappear in other narratives: the origin of the universe from a primordial sound; the wedding of a female and a male principle, represented by a wave and a beam of light; the pursuit and martyrdom of a prophet; the magical power of music. What Losada calls the "dynamic" character of myth - that is, the possibility of modifying certain mythemes - could seem doubtful in the case of the *Preparatory Act*, since - so far as we know - no "mythical tradition" has arisen from it. However, such "mythical tradition" was on the brink of starting when Skrjabin himself began to write a second version of his text (nonetheless, the differences between the unfinished second version and the first one pertain more to expression than to content, making them irrelevant for our topic).

While historical evidence might seem lacking in the *Preparatory Act*, this is perhaps true only in part: although the prophet does not bring about dematerialization, Skrjabin believed he himself would cause it. One could therefore argue that the historical basis for the narrative about dematerialization through music consisted of an actually-existing person: Skrjabin himself. Such historical basis did not belong to the past, but would belong to the future (at least according to Skrjabin). The aim of the *Preparatory Act*, then, would not be to merely explain what happened, but to forecast what would happen. The narrative about the origin of the universe and humankind was there to provide the foundation for the one about music's magical power. Furthermore, we have seen that the *Preparatory Act* contains a cosmogony and a cosmology, an anthropogony and an anthropology, as well as an eschatology. The *Preparatory Act* manages to somehow meet a requirement pointed out by Losada for fairy tales - that of incorporating a certain amount of reality to make an extraordinary event credible (Losada 73).

However, rather than building credible spatial and temporal coordinates for his desired extraordinary event, Skrjabin built a conceptual, ideological background (the presence of sound at the very beginning of cosmogony). This, nevertheless, is just a *petitio principii*, because nothing demonstrates that the universe and the humankind were born in the way the *Preparatory Act* tells. On the other hand, studying the "amount of reality" of Skrjabin's cosmogony and anthropogony would lead us too far from our topic (music's magical power). That said, the importance of cosmogony and eschatology, and the logical connection between the two in the *Preparatory Act* strongly suggests that we are dealing with a myth here.

Nevertheless, this now begs the question as to whether or not a conflict exists in the *Preparatory Act*. It obviously does, and involves strong emotions: first, the female and male principles struggle to meet; then, humankind falls into the abyss of evil. Lastly, the prophet attempts to free humankind and lead it towards demateriali-

zation and ecstasy despite enduring pursuit and martyrdom. Further, the whole contents of the *Preparatory Act* was conceived for being enacted - that is: it was meant to serve a ritual function.

Last but not least, let us examine whether the *Preparatory Act* refers to a supernatural, divine person that interacts with the human characters - an element which, according to Losada, defines the kind of transcendence we find in myths (Losada 98). Bearing this in mind, it is important to remember that, at the end of the *Preparatory Act*, dematerialization and ecstasy are brought about by a “final lyre consonance” (v. 1031, in Скрябин 234; cf. Morrison 347), and that, judging from vv. 854-9 (Скрябин 229; Morrison 341), one would assume that a divine person is playing that lyre.

Therefore, we think that the text of the *Preparatory Act* meets all requirements for it to be considered not just a fantasy, but a myth. Skryabin would no doubt have been delighted with this conclusion, since philosophy professor Boris Aleksandrovič Vogt (1875-1946) recalls that Skryabin told him the following words, showing the importance he afforded to myths:

Я думаю, что постигнуть это существо бытия как первоначальной деятельности нельзя иначе, как оставив за собой все обычное и перейдя к *чрезвычайному*, в известном смысле, если хотите, к *чуду*, во всяком случае, к *чему-то*, для обычных глаз и неизощренного зрения *невидимому, оккультному*, только через *особое посвящение* и упражнение становящемуся доступным... Здесь необходима, как мне кажется, уже не простая философия, но теософия с помогающими ей оккультными знаниями или науками, необходим особый подъем духа, *экстаз* и посвящение в тайны, *мифика*, если хотите! (Фохт 208, and Лобанова 77).

I think that you cannot reach that essence of being as primordial activity except by leaving behind you everything ordinary and proceeding to the *extraordinary*, in a certain sense, to *miracle* if you will; anyway, to *something* that is *invisible, occult* for ordinary eyes and for an unrefined vision; something that only becomes accessible through a *special initiation* and exercises... To me, what is necessary, here, is not just philosophy, but theosophy with its auxiliary occult knowledge and sciences; a special eagerness of the spirit is required, *ecstasy* and the initiation into mystery - *myths*, if you will! [our translation].

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