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SCRIABIN
POEM OF
ECSTASY

AND LISZT
LES PRÉLUDES

BOSTON SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

PIERRE MONTEUX,
CONDUCTOR

Scriabin POEM OF ECSTASY, Op. 54 *Liszt* LES PRÉLUDES (Symphonic Poem No. 3)

SIDE 1 POEM OF ECSTASY, Op. 54 Roger Voisin, *Trumpet*

"To be regarded merely as a musician," Scriabin once said to his friend Leonid Sabaniev, "would be the worst fate that could befall me . . . It would be terrible to remain nothing more than a composer of sonatas and symphonies."

What worried this composer was that his religion and his philosophy, to him the paramount truths which his music served only to demonstrate, got little or no serious attention as the music itself made its way across the world. Scriabin was always expounding his ideal life scheme when he could get anyone to listen. His credo was hard to follow and hard to accept. It was compounded of Nietzsche, of theosophy, pantheism and other mystical faiths, and based on some sort of Marxian economy. He dreamed of its perfect realization in a temple he would at last build in India, a shrine dedicated to the ultimate beauty, where the arts would be united on a lofty plane of exquisite sensuous expression. Toward this end he worked out and increasingly cultivated a system of harmonic chords, chromatic in character. Toward this end, too, he wrote his *Poem of Ecstasy*, his *Divine Poem* and his *Prometheus* where he tried to enhance and clarify the message of his tones by combining them with "corresponding" colors and perfumes. To most people, certainly to most Western people, the supersensuous suggests the erotic rather than the spiritual. Some pronounced him mad, some withdrew in alarm from his music. Others, and particularly those who had not probed into its origins and could listen to it purely for its worth and appeal as music, were carried away by the truly extraordinary and unprecedented sounds he could draw from a symphony orchestra. The brilliance of his treatment, the upward urge of his streaming trumpet tones, the excitement of his climaxes, electrified audiences which knew little and cared less about the faith his music was supposed to be preaching.

Printed in the score of *The Poem of Ecstasy* is a long explanatory poem by the composer telling of the "Spirit's" thirst for life and search for the fullest "bliss of love." Exhausted, the Spirit rises again, with a new "premonition," a new consciousness of the "divine force of his will." The Spirit descends once more to comprehend "the mystery of the depths of evil." At last the height is attained and "the universe resounds with a joyful cry 'I am.'"

Mr. Eaglefield Hull, Scriabin's prime explicator in England, shows that the basic idea of this work is "the ecstasy of untrammelled action, the joy of creative activity." A prologue contains two motives symbolizing "human striving after the ideal and the Ego theme gradually realizing itself." The main part, following the sonata form, symbolizes "the soaring flight of the Spirit."

No one can say to what extent Scriabin's spiritual migrations may have inspired or conditioned the music which has survived. Its form is less original than its message for it is built upon classical patterns. But it can be asserted with confidence that if Scriabin had not had his dreams and believed in them passionately and with all the capacity of his (unorthodox) soul, the musical sublimations of which *The Poem of Ecstasy* is the most out-

Boston Symphony Orchestra

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standing could never have been completed. Nor, if we are to respond to their musical message, should the composer's creed of "aesthetic ecstasy" be entirely dismissed.

It was in 1903 that Scriabin, then 31, resigned from the Moscow Conservatory to abandon teaching and to devote his life to creative work. His remaining years were occupied with composing interrupted by various tours when as pianist he spread his own gospel as best he could. These tours took him to America in 1906, along the Volga with Koussevitzky in the summers of 1910 and 1911, and to England in the spring of 1914. It was in Switzerland in 1907 that he completed *The Poem of Ecstasy*. Scriabin often worked out his more ambitious scores by degrees, carrying them about with him, playing them on the piano and expounding them to all who would listen. *The Poem of Ecstasy* was no exception. He began it, according to Gerald Abraham, in a little villa at Bogliasco, near Genoa, Italy, where he sought solitude for ten months from June, 1905, with Tatiana Schloezer, the artistic companion and lover with whom he then fled from the world's scrutiny, having shortly before left his wife. Their garden was luxuriant with "oranges, pines and cacti"; the prospect of the Mediterranean was fine. The heat was intense, but the composer welcomed it, "sunning himself through even the hottest hours of the day, occasionally working, but more often surrendering himself to blissful indolence."

Scriabin heard of a conductor in New York named Modest Altschuler who had an orchestra and was receptive to new Russian music. The composer wrote to him and at once received an urgent invitation to come to America with his orchestral scores, prepared to give recitals and appear in his concerto. Scriabin did so, and gave recitals in New York, Chicago and Detroit, listened to his *Divine Poem*, as presented by Altschuler. When Tatiana Schloezer joined him in the following month (January, 1907), Sovonov, then conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, resolutely closed those concerts to him and his music. The "social hypocrisy of the Americans," in the words of Y. D. Engel, was so aroused that Scriabin and Tatiana had to flee the country in haste, and just managed to reach Paris in March in a quite penniless condition.

In the year 1908, Serge Koussevitzky became his publisher and propagandist at his concerts in Moscow. In St.

Petersburg his music, and especially *The Poem of Ecstasy*, grew to be more than a topic—it was cause for broken friendships. Y. D. Engel has written: "It is difficult to describe the excitement that reigned. Perfect strangers that happened to get into conversation quarreled warmly or shook each other's hands in delight; sometimes there were even more unrestrained scenes of agitation and enthusiasm."

SIDE 2

LES PRÉLUDES (Symphonic Poem No. 3)

When Liszt invented the term *symphonic poem* (*Symphonische Dichtung*) and composed a dozen of them to prove his point (*Les Préludes* was the third to appear, in 1856) he was really giving an extremely convenient title to the trend toward descriptive music—a trend as old as Berlioz' *Fantastic Symphony* of 1830, indeed as old as Beethoven or Bach before him. But he gave the proper name to what his predecessors called an *overture* or a *symphony*. He also opened the way for generations of *tone poets* to follow, Alexander Scriabin among them, who would pursue the practice of conditioning musical form to literary subjects. The title itself was a challenge and implied a declaration that a metamorphosis of themes by color transformation could replace the classical procedure of symphonic development. So started the endless controversy over the validity of program music—and the split between the pictorial line of Liszt-Wagner-Strauss, and the symphonic line of Schumann-Brahms.

Circumstances do not prove the music and the poem inseparable in this case. Liszt first drafted a cantata on the *Four Elements* in 1844, later looked in vain to Victor Hugo for a text and at last in 1854 fixed upon a poem by Alphonse Lamartine. One reads at the head of the score Liszt's summary: "What is life but a series of Preludes to that unknown song whose initial solemn note is tolled by death? . . ." Without the help of Lamartine or even of Liszt's literary guidance, one need only accept the rounded periods, the splendid rhetoric, the glowing brass, all in the language of tones alone, in what turns out to be essentially a classical *overture* freely expanded.

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