

Analysis of Scriabin's Sonata No. 9 ("Black Mass"), Op. 68

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) was a Russian composer and pianist. An early modern composer, Scriabin's inventiveness and controversial techniques, inspired by mysticism, synesthesia, and theology, contributed greatly to redefining Russian piano music and the modern musical era as a whole. Scriabin studied at the Moscow Conservatory with peers Anton Arensky, Sergei Taneyev, and Vasily Safonov. His ten piano sonatas are considered some of his greatest masterpieces; the first, Piano Sonata No. 1 In F Minor, was composed during his conservatory years. His Sonata No. 9 ("Black Mass"), Op. 68 was composed in 1912-13 and, more than any other sonata, encapsulates Scriabin's philosophical and mystical related influences.

Sonata No. 9 ("Black Mass"), Op. 68 is a single movement and lasts about 8-10 minutes. Despite the one movement structure, there are eight large tempo markings throughout the piece that imply a sense of slight division. They are: Moderato Quasi Andante (pg. 1), Molto Meno Vivo (pg. 7), Allegro (pg. 10), Allegro Molto (pg. 13), Alla Marcia (pg. 14), Allegro (p. 15), Presto (pg. 16), and Tempo I (pg. 16). As was common in Scriabin's later works, the piece is extremely chromatic and atonal. Many of its recurring themes center around the extremely dissonant interval of a minor ninth¹, and features several transformations of its opening theme, usually increasing in complexity in each of its restatements. Further, a common Scriabin quality involves his use of

¹ Wise, H. Harold, "The relationship of pitch sets to formal structure in the last six piano sonatas of Scriabin," *UR Research* 1987, p. no's 29-72.
<https://urresearch.rochester.edu/institutionalPublicationPublicView.action?institutionalItemId=8541&versionNumber=1>

combining themes simultaneously, additionally increasing the density of dissonance and overall instability. This thematic combination at times results in a need for such virtuosic playing that a total of three staves are used (e.g. measures 19, 51-59, 159-162, and 183-186). In the 9th sonata, the only truly recurring theme is the opening theme, which is restated in the coda.

It is impossible to properly analyze Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 9 ("Black Mass"), Op. 68 without first understanding the mysticism and symbolism Scriabin imbued into practically every element of the music. Beginning with the opening measure's tempo marking, *Legendaire*, meaning most roughly legendary, from the get-go a never seen before dynamic marking that is, at best, a somewhat feasible mood attainable by a pianist. One can assume *Legendaire* is perhaps closely related to more traditional markings such as *With Determination*, *With Intent*, or *With Feeling*, but Scriabin opts for a distinctly specific word that directly refers to his interest in theosophy, an esoteric philosophy focused on questions of divinity. Further similarly esoteric and mystic-related dynamic markings with programmatic overtones include (English translation:) *Mysteriously murmuring*, *pure and clear*, *dark and mysterious*, and most enigmatic: *caressing and poisonous*.

The mystical and unique moods Scriabin sought for via his curious musical markings were of course, only with certainty accomplished by the notes themselves. Scriabin's "mystic chord" is one of his most famous developments, cultivated from his appetite for French augmented sixth chords, tritone substitutions for dominant chords, and other symmetrical structures. These interests led to experimentation with stacked fourths, or quartal harmonies. Though emphasizing IV or any interval of a perfect fourth

above a pitch had become commonplace since the late Romantic era as a harbinger to the eventual dissolution of tonality, Scriabin's fourths experimentations led him into uncharted territory, eventually culminating in the development of the "mystic chord." This chord became its own tonic in a piece of music and, despite its dissonance, the landmark and referential chord in an atonal harmonic system. A mystic chord built on C contains the notes C, F#, B-flat, E, A and D. The bottom four notes (C-F#-B-flat-E) form a French augmented sixth chord. Due to its rather eclectic pitch collection, elements of octatonic and whole-tone scales are present, but in action, the mystic chord generally lacks continuation of these scales.

The first occurrence of the mystic chord occurs in the very first measure. Here, it occurs horizontally built upon the root G, which occurs on beat one with a B above it. Then, the necessary tritone of G occurs on the second eighth note of beat one, with C# in the same voice. The F follows on beat two in the same voice, and lastly the final note of the mystic chord and French augmented sixth portion occurs with note B in the same voice on beat two's second eighth note. The typical series of stacked fourths are not employed quite yet here, Scriabin perhaps saving the buildup for a more climactic point in the music, as seen in measures 30, 23 and 33.

The more elaborated mystic chord can be seen in measures 30, 32 and 33 as vertical chords on the downbeat. Each chord is marked forte and is sandwiched between two piano-marked sections. In addition, each chord is trilled. Though trills abound throughout the whole sonata (Scriabin placed great importance on trills beyond purely aesthetic means; he believed them to be symbolic of the vibrations of the universe and

signifiers of bright light)², it is clear these mystic chords are of structural importance, as phrases continually resolve with a slew of them. After their occurrence, a new phrase and idea generally occurs, anchoring the chord's importance in Scriabin's harmonic structure.

Occurring after a roughly ten-measure phrase (measures 20-29), this mystic chord is built upon the note E, though the tritone B-flat is in the bass. It contains, from bottom up, the pitches B-flat, E, A-flat, D, G-flat, C-flat. Thus, the French augmented sixth is formed from the notes E, B-flat, D and A-flat. As in a typical mystic chord, the fourth above the root of the French augmented sixth's third (A-flat) occurs in the next beat with the accented and trilled D-flat in the right hand. The fourth of the D-flat occurred in the non-French augmented sixth related note of the previous beat, G-flat. Lastly, the fourth of G-flat is achieved via the trilled high C-flat in the right hand on the previous first beat. Therefore, the mystic chord used here uses not only the inherent French augmented sixth chord, but four stacked fourths (A-flat, D-flat, G-flat, C-flat). Thus, Scriabin, in one systematic chord, releases eight out of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale.

This is not atypical for Scriabin, and certainly not in the sonata as the same chord (though not necessarily built on E) occurs throughout the piece, especially two and three measures after measure 30's appearance, in measures 32 and 33. It's a possibility that the otherworldly, mystical quality Scriabin always aspired to was, to his mind, accomplished via a musical stacking of several fourths, almost in the same fashion ancient civilizations build taller and taller buildings to reach "heaven." Whether that be a stretch or not, Scriabin certainly ascribed the ever increasing dissonance and density of complexity of

² Garcia, Susanna, "Scriabin's Symbolist Plot Archetype in the Late Piano Sonatas," *University of California Press* 2000, p. no's 273-285
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/746881>

his later sonatas, notably the 9th, to his goal of completing a purely inhuman, mystical piece of music.

An interesting and paradoxical quality exists in the fact that the Sonata, though in one movement, and as seen, entirely atonal and of its own Scriabin-innovated harmonic system, adheres to sonata form to more of a degree than in his less experimental earlier sonatas. The opening prelude, as mentioned before, marked *Legendaire*, moves toward a rhythmic cell of triplets that end up dominating the entire rest of the piece. In fact, it is these, at first only one repeated note triplets that are marked “avec une douceur de plus en plus caressante et empoisonnee” or “with a sweetness of an increasingly caressing and poisonous nature,” that end up bearing in pitch and rhythmic nature, the closest semblance to a retransition. A second developmental theme then occurs in measure 69, relatively the same rhythmically as the opening first subject group (which lasts from measures 1-34 and is followed by what can be arguably labeled a transition to the development or theme two of the exposition between measures 35-68, especially considering its roughly equal length to the first theme)¹. However, it follows with a rapidity of motion and fresh continuous new ideas that merit its title as the development, especially when heard in the complete context of the piece as a whole.

With the confirmation of the development’s beginning in measure 69, traditional sonata form becomes a bit less applicable, as the rest of the sonata behaves more as an increasingly elaborated, complex, and tension-inducing continuous structure, lacking in

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any real recurring pattern harmonically or melodically. Thus, there is no literal repeat of the material from measures 1-68, which would form a true retransition. Rather, the development appears to take on different forms and build upon only itself with decidedly forward motion. However, evidence of the Exposition's first theme (measures 1-34) exists from measures 155-179, suggesting a semblance of a retransition beginning in measure 155. This is further supported in measure 179 (*Alla Marcia*) by a somewhat rhythmically similar and reminiscent theme that recalls the second Exposition's theme (which began in measure 35).

Both thematic recollections of the shaky recapitulation, are, in a twentieth-century fashion, distorted and rather submerged in other harmonies, tempi and rhythmic expansions to render their recapitulation-accessibility to a listener somewhat irrelevant. Lastly, however, the coda (beginning in measure 201) satisfies the ambiguity of the recapitulation as it consists of melodic material taken directly from the first seven measures of the first subject (in measure 210-216), albeit with a modified, more resolute final three measures.

The use of mystic chords, extreme virtuosity and overwhelming, almost suffocating at times, use of triplets perhaps earn Scriabin's Sonata No. 9, Op. 68 the nickname "Black Mass." Further, the mystic chord and other harmonies' reliance on an emphasized tritone conjure Devil-related ideas. For Scriabin, however, these harsh dissonant qualities most developed in his later life only came closer to the complete mysticism he sought for in his music, in somewhat stark contrast to the purer, more tonal route most Modern era composers took towards the end of their life in a final search for

salvation with God. Scriabin's personal ideals of a higher power obviously differ from the common zeitgeist of preceding musical history.