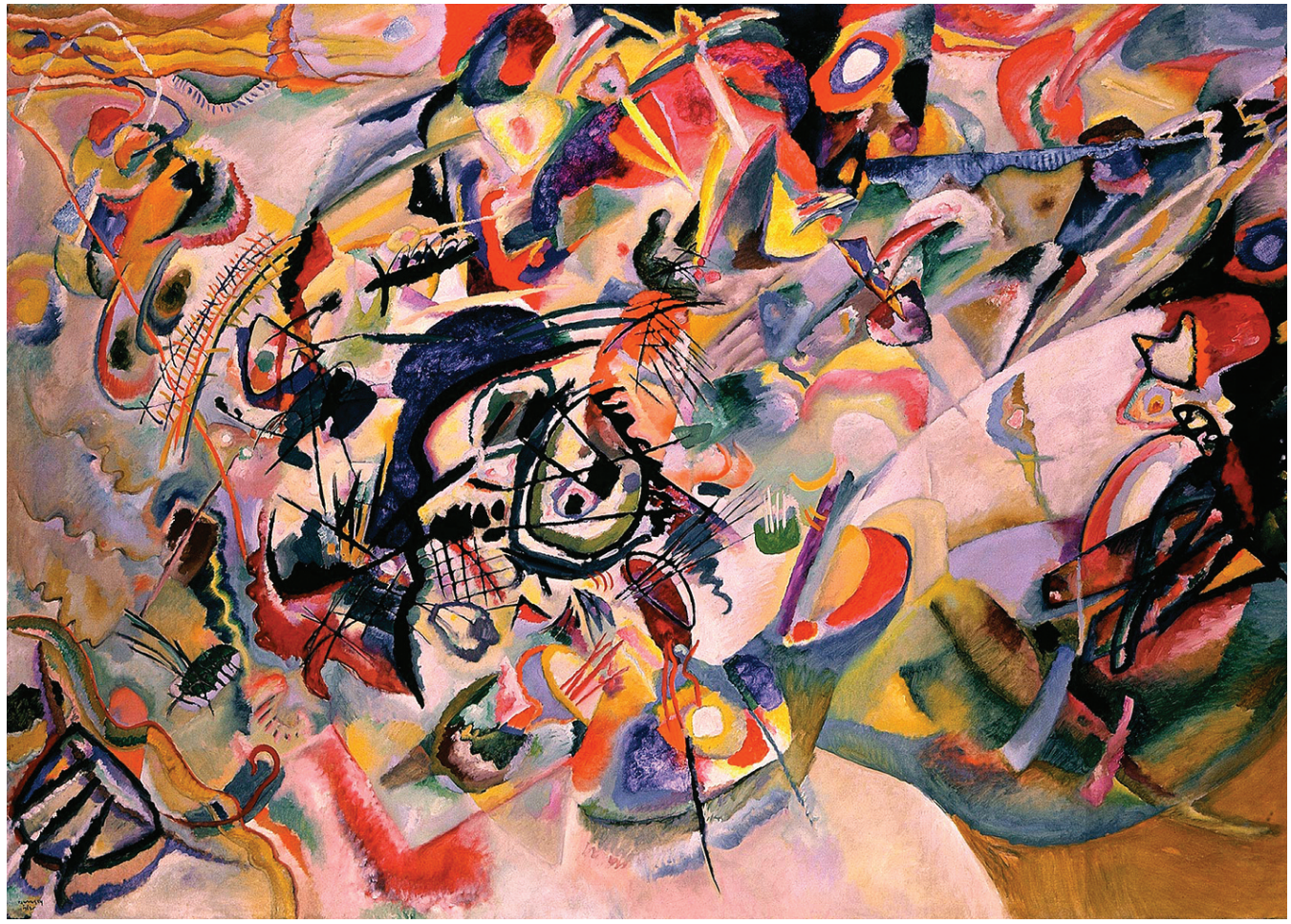
SCRIABIN

The Poem of Ecstasy • Symphony No. 2

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra
JoAnn Falletta



Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

The Poem of Ecstasy (Symphony No. 4) • Symphony No. 2

Alexander Scriabin is one of those fascinating historical figures whose unorthodox beliefs about music and life continue to generate controversy. He was given to making brazenly outrageous pronouncements, and once described the music of Igor Stravinsky as 'a mass of insolence and a minimum of creative power.' Half a century later he himself was taken down a peg or two by Wilfrid Mellers, who memorably wrote that 'Scriabin whipping himself into ecstasy is not so different from that other cosmopolitan Russian, Tchaikovsky, whipping himself into fury or despair: except that Scriabin's melodic vitality is so much lower.' The use of the word 'vitality' is interesting because Scriabin always attached great psychological importance to the idea of artistic and physical potency. According to the musicologist Leonid Sabaneyev (a former colleague of the composer) Scriabin inextricably linked the creative act with the sexual and maintained that maximum creative power is inseparable from maximum eroticism. He even claimed that it was a decrease in sexual vitality in the ageing Wagner that accounts for the stylistic differences between *Tristan* and *Parsifal*.

At an age when he would still have considered his own vitality to be wholly undiminished, Scriabin succumbed to fatal septicaemia caused by an abscess on his lip. He was only 43. His unrealised projects included his magnum opus: an ambitious sacred theatre piece called *Mysterium*, which was envisaged as 'the act of union between the Male-Creator and the Woman-World'. It was intended to be a transformative event for all humanity, and members of the audience were to indulge in passionate behaviour if they felt so moved. Scriabin aimed to produce it over the course of seven days and seven nights in the Himalayas, and he even went so far as to acquire a plot of land in Darjeeling for this purpose.

The Poem of Ecstasy may be somewhat tamer than *Mysterium*, but as Martin Cooper has observed, there is still 'plenty of internal evidence to suggest erotic connotations.' Indeed, there is no escaping the unmistakable nature of erotic fantasy implied by such musical directions as 'avec une volupté de plus en plus extatique' which, if fully observed, propel the piece almost literally towards an ineffable release of delayed gratification redolent of the yearning of Tristan and Isolde.

Composed between 1905 and 1908, *The Poem of Ecstasy* (sometimes referred to as the *Symphony No. 4*) is a single-movement work. The bulk of it was written in Italy and France. Scriabin liked to recall the rapture he felt when composing this extraordinary expression of creation and self-fulfilment: 'I gasp for breath, but oh, what bliss! The very metre kindles the meaning…' The world premiere was intended to take place in St Petersburg on 29 February 1908, but the event was postponed. Consequently, the first people to be publicly subjected to the raw sensualism of this remarkable piece were the unsuspecting audience members who had gathered for a concert promoted by the Russian Symphony Society in New York in December 1908. It was presented by Modest Altschuler, an émigré conductor who made a point of featuring new Russian music in his concert programmes, and who was keenly attuned to the finer points of Scriabin's musical aesthetic. The Anglo-Russian conductor Albert Coates likewise appreciated the powerful symbolism contained in the composer's comment: 'When you listen to *Ecstasy*, look straight into the eye of the sun!' In 1919 Coates reported that the proletariat of Petrograd (as St Petersburg had become) went wild whenever he conducted the piece. In Britain, however, Coates's contemporaries were sharply divided in their views. Henry Wood was happy to conduct such extravagant effusions, but Adrian Boult flatly refused to countenance the excesses of this 'evil music'. As director of music at the BBC, he effectively banned Scriabin from the airwaves for much of the 1930s.

Scriabin's egotistic individualism contrasted sharply with the altogether more austere collective sensibilities that governed mid-20th-century Soviet officialdom, but his works were still performed by such distinguished artists as the pianist Sviatoslav Richter and the conductor Yevgeny Svetlanov. Given this official ambivalence, one wonders what point Soviet Radio was trying to make in 1961 when they beamed *The Poem of Ecstasy* into outer space to coincide with Yuri Gagarin being the first human to orbit the Earth. A clue might, perhaps, be gleaned from a contemporary issue of *Sovetskaya muzika*, which implies that *The Poem of Ecstasy* and the space flight together represent 'a triumphant synthesis of the meaning of art and revolution.' Interestingly, the concept of *vzlyot* ('flight' or 'take-off') can actually be found in some of Scriabin's music, including the *Piano Sonata No. 5*, which was written simultaneously with *The Poem of Ecstasy*. It seems highly unlikely, however, that the Soviet authorities were thinking of anything as outlandish as Scriabin's boast that were he to jump off a bridge parapet he would remain suspended in mid-air and be totally unharmed.

Scriabin's mother was an excellent pianist, but she died when the young Alexander was still in his infancy. He was then brought up by his grandmother and an adoring aunt. These women carefully nurtured their charge's obvious musicality. Scriabin's compositions from this early period consisted largely of exquisite piano miniatures that are often highly perfumed. Their delicacy of phrase and harmony were perfectly matched by his personal appearance to which he always paid great attention. Like his fellow student Sergey Rachmaninov, Scriabin developed his brilliant pianistic skills at the Moscow Conservatoire and then embarked on several extended concert tours across Europe. In Paris, he immersed himself in the aesthetic ideology of the French Decadent movement, which confirmed his belief in the natural superiority of creativity and pleasure over pure logic. After returning from Paris to Moscow he was appointed as a piano professor at the Conservatoire. His teaching commitments significantly limited his opportunities for foreign travel, so he therefore decided to re-channel his creative urges into composing large-scale orchestral works, including the *Symphony No. 1*, which dates from 1899–1900. This piece ends with a choral finale, but a year or so later Scriabin followed it with his *Symphony No. 2*, which is purely orchestral.

The Soviet Union's retrospective (and somewhat sanitised) official interpretation of Scriabin's place in Russian music during the early years of the 20th century was that he welcomed the Revolution of 1905 'with his entire being'. He was characterised as 'an artist of an enquiring mind and keen perception who revered art, life and nature and was ardently seeking an answer to life's problems.' In the years following the formation of the new Soviet state, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was the first People's Commissar responsible for education, spoke approvingly of the late Scriabin's music as 'a stupendous force that is at one and the same time destructive and aspiring to a higher order.' This philosophical quest of the young Scriabin is reflected in the *Symphony No. 2*, which is presented as a celebration of the beauty of life and the artist's desire to decode its essential meaning.

Scriabin's own deeply personal orchestral sound world is very much to the fore in the *Symphony No. 2* despite some echoes of Tchaikovsky, Wagner and Strauss, but his structural plan owes an obvious debt to César Franck, who had taken the idea of cyclical composition to new levels of artistic sophistication in such monumental works as his *Symphony* and *String Quartet*. In pieces like these, the same musical ideas or motifs act as memorable unifying reference points, recurring in different guises throughout all the movements. Scriabin adopts a similar approach in his *Symphony No. 2*. For example, the brooding opening motif of the first movement, played *serioso* on the clarinet, reappears as the *maestoso* finale, but now triumphantly transformed into full orchestral pomp.

Ever since Anatoly Liadov conducted its premiere in Moscow in January 1902, the *Symphony No. 2* has always tended to attract fewer ardent champions than Scriabin's other mature orchestral works. This is rather surprising given that over the course of all five movements, the symphony is awash with sweeping climaxes, passages of great majestic intensity, and swirls of rich orchestral tone colours, enough to beguile any listener.

Anthony Short

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Founded in 1935, the GRAMMY Award-winning Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO) is Buffalo's leading cultural ambassador, presenting more than 120 classics, pops and youth concerts each year. Since 1940, the orchestra's permanent home has been Kleinhans Music Hall. In March 2018, the BPO became the first American orchestra to perform at the Beethoven Easter Festival in Warsaw, Poland. In 2022, they made their 24th appearance at Carnegie Hall celebrating the life and works of Lukas Foss, former BPO music director. Over the decades, the BPO has matured in stature under leading conductors William Steinberg, Josef Krips, Lukas Foss, Michael Tilson Thomas, Julius Rudel, Semyon Bychkov and Maximiano Valdés. During the tenure of JoAnn Falletta, the BPO has rekindled its distinguished history of radio broadcasts and recordings, including the release of around 50 albums of diverse repertoire on the Naxos and Beau Fleuve Records labels. The Philharmonic's recording of John Corigliano's *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* (Naxos 8.559331), featuring soprano Hila Plitmann, received GRAMMY Awards for Best Classical Vocal Performance and Best Classical Contemporary Composition, and its recording of Richard Danielpour's *The Passion of Yeshua* (Naxos 8.559885-86) received a GRAMMY Award for Best Choral Performance. www.bpo.org

JoAnn Falletta

Photo: Heather Bellini

Multiple GRAMMY-winning conductor JoAnn Falletta serves as music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO) and music director laureate of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. She has guest conducted many of the most prominent orchestras in America, Canada, Europe, Asia and South America. As music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic, Falletta became the first woman to lead a major American ensemble. With a discography of over 120 titles, she is a leading recording artist for Naxos. Her GRAMMY-winning Naxos recordings include Richard Danielpour's *The Passion of Yeshua* with the BPO (8.559885-86), Kenneth Fuchs' *Spiritualist* with the London Symphony Orchestra (8.559824) and John Corigliano's *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* with the BPO (8.559331). Falletta is a member of the esteemed American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has served as a member of the National Council on the Arts, is the recipient of many of the most prestigious conducting awards and was named *Performance Today*'s Classical Woman of the Year 2019 and one of the 50 great conductors of all time by *Gramophone* magazine. www.joannfalletta.com

Scriabin composed most of his single-movement fourth symphony *The Poem of Ecstasy* between 1905 and 1908 in Italy and France. He originally intended it to be called *Poème orgiaque* ('Orgiastic Poem') with its unprecedented raw sensuality and overpowering aesthetic, taking chromaticism beyond even Wagnerian voluptuousness. His earlier *Symphony No. 2 in C minor* adopts César Franck's cyclical ideas to which Scriabin layered sweeping climaxes, majestic intensity and rich orchestral colour that enliven its five movements with ceaseless invention.

Alexander
SCRIABIN
(1872–1915)

1	**Le Poème de l'extase, Op. 54 ('The Poem of Ecstasy') (Symphony No. 4)** (1905–08)	**19:15**
	Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 29 (1901)	**40:17**
2	**I. Andante –**	**6:29**
3	**II. Allegro**	**9:13**
4	**III. Andante**	**10:47**
5	**IV. Tempestoso –**	**5:55**
6	**V. Maestoso**	**7:45**

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Producers, engineers and editors: Tim Handley 1, Bernd Gottinger 2–6
Booklet notes: Anthony Short
Cover painting: *Composition VII* (1913) by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944)