



# SCRIABIN

Piano  
Music

Sonate-Fantaisie  
Impromptus  
Nocturne

Soyeon Kate Lee, Piano

## Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

### Piano Music

'... a strange and lonely creative spirit whose genius somehow miscarried and led him into paths where no "pure" musician would ever dare to tread.'

When the music critic Rollo Myers ended an article on Alexander Scriabin in *The Musical Times* with those words in 1957, the composer's stock was at an all-time low. Adrian Boult, for instance, objected strongly to Scriabin's interest in Theosophy and loathed his music so much that he refused to conduct it, arguing that such 'evil' stuff should be banned by the BBC.

At the time of his death in 1915 at the age of 43, however, and for a decade or so afterwards, Scriabin exerted a powerful influence over many musicians and artists throughout the world including Rachmaninov and Prokofiev. Boris Pasternak even studied composition with Scriabin before turning to literature, and Tolstoy, too, admired much about Scriabin's musical output, which he considered to be 'a sincere expression of genius'.

From time to time, cautionary words were spoken and written about Scriabin's 'mission' in life and his obsession with *Mysterium*, his unrealised magnum opus, which was to have been a grand week-long artistic celebration designed for the ultimate stimulation of all the senses, emotions and passions. It would be performed against a backdrop of the Himalayas, and by some unspecified means it would bring about the dissolution of the world in a state of bliss. Messiah-like, Scriabin would direct the entire proceedings.

For Scriabin's many admirers *Mysterium* was merely the whim of a great composer, but for others it appeared to suggest a tragic and profound psychological disturbance. In the July 1966 edition of the American journal *Russian Review*, Leonid Sabaneeff wrote a memoir of his former colleague. He charted the development of Scriabin's psychosis, which appears to have manifested itself at around the age of thirty-five. Sabaneeff also observed that a large part of the posthumous esteem in which Scriabin was held in the

1920s 'was based more on snobism than on a deep artistic feeling or real appreciation of his works. Scriabin was riding the current of fashion.'

If Scriabin's last decade was highly controversial, both in terms of his musical innovations and his state of mind, his early years were, in contrast, almost disappointingly stable, though by no means did they lack colour. He was brought up in Moscow, and after the death of his mother, a concert pianist, he was cared for (and, by all accounts, spoilt) by his grandmother, great aunt and his father's unmarried sister. He rarely saw his father, who was a member of the imperial diplomatic service. At the age of eight he fell in love with a girl, and later claimed that this was the moment when he began to appreciate life's erotic pleasures. If he was precocious in matters of love, he was equally precocious when it came to playing the piano, and could match Rachmaninov in virtuosity – they were both pupils of Nikolai Zverev. He later studied at the Moscow Conservatoire, where his composition teachers included Anton Arensky and Sergey Taneyev.

In 1894 Scriabin not only made his debut as a concert pianist, but also impressed the music publisher Mitrofan Belyayev, who in addition to sponsoring a concert tour, commissioned piano music from him and paid him double the going rate. It was a huge honour for Scriabin to be published alongside established composers such as Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov. By that time he had already produced a substantial body of works including many of the works presented here.

The *Canon in D minor* was composed in 1883 when Scriabin was 11, although it remained unpublished until 1927. The editors retained the composer's minor idiosyncrasies of notation, which can be attributed to youthful inexperience. Even a work as juvenile as this already possesses some of the languor of his more mature music as well as suggestions of sensuousness.

The tonal language of the young Scriabin was clearly inspired by the example of his hero Chopin whose influence is plain to hear in the *Impromptus* and

*Impromptus à la Mazur*. Nevertheless, the examples in this collection, which date from between 1885 and 1895, all hint at the Russian darkness that was to be a hallmark of the mature composer, together with occasional flashes of fire.

In 1886, when he was 14, Scriabin wrote a series of emotionally charged love letters to a girl called Natalia Sekerina. He also dedicated his *Sonate-fantaisie* to her. It is one of the most ambitious works he had yet composed, and it is decidedly more sophisticated than his earlier work. The demands he makes on the performer are considerable, and he writes some massive chords with stretches of up to a twelfth, which he himself must only have been able to execute with a degree of artifice, for his hands were so small he could barely stretch a ninth.

The background to the composition of the *Variations on a theme by Mlle Egorova* (1887) is a mystery, because no one really knows who Mlle Egorova was. Nevertheless, these variations exude a distinctive charm that is reminiscent of Liadov, one of Scriabin's mentors. Commentators suggest that the work may have been completed hastily, and the first two variations certainly suggest that Scriabin might have been planning a work on a grander scale. All we actually get, though, are three variations, which are rounded off by a brief reminder of the theme itself and a coda.

It is surprising that Scriabin composed so few nocturnes, considering his life-long admiration for Chopin. Even the ones he did write do not conjure up an especially nocturnal image. The *Two Nocturnes, Op. 5*, written in 1890, could just as easily be called 'impromptus'. Nevertheless, they demonstrate his willingness to experiment with rhythmic freedom and

harmony. Scriabin only wrote one other nocturne, the second of his *Two Pieces for Left Hand, Op. 9*, which emerged as the consequence of injuring his right hand while practising.

The remaining works on this recording were written between 1905 and 1908, and they clearly illustrate Scriabin's by now very personal sound world. The *Scherzo, Op. 46*, is a tonally ambiguous rapid chord study. Scriabin told Sabaneeff that 'all music must be communicable in dance', which is indeed the case with *Quasi-valse, Op. 47*. Scriabin's contemporaries regarded his music as 'highly spiced', an apposite description of the miniature *Réverie, Op. 49, No. 3*. The *Two Pieces, Op. 57*, while beautifully exquisite, are pointers to the later, more megalomaniacal Scriabin, the man who once described himself as 'all impulse, all desire...'.

**Anthony Short**

Discovering Scriabin's lesser-known works, presented throughout this recording, has been a musical treasure hunt for me, with unique gems to be found on every page. His language, although deeply rooted in his admiration for Chopin, is unmistakably and powerfully personal, and his music always leaves me with intoxicating harmonic and melodic fragrances.

This recording is dedicated to my parents, Gyu Cheon Lee and Hee Hyang Choi, with the deepest love, gratitude, and admiration.

**Soyeon Kate Lee**

## Soyeon Kate Lee



Photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

First prize winner of the 2010 Naumburg International Piano Competition and the 2004 Concert Artist Guild International Competition, Korean-American pianist Soyeon Kate Lee has performed as soloist with numerous orchestras, including the Cleveland Orchestra, the London Symphony Orchestra, the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional of the Dominican Republic, Orquesta de Valencia, the Louisiana Philharmonic, the San Diego Symphony, and the Naples Philharmonic, Florida. In recent seasons she has given recitals at New York's Zankel, Alice Tully, and Merkin halls, Kennedy Center, Ravinia Festival, the National Auditorium, Madrid and the Herbst Theatre, San Francisco. A second prize and Mozart Prize winner of the Cleveland International Piano Competition and a laureate of the Santander International Piano Competition in Spain, she has worked extensively with Richard Goode, Robert McDonald, Ursula Oppens, and Jerome Lowenthal. She is the co-founder and artistic director of Music by the Glass, a concert series dedicated to bringing together young professionals in New York City. A Yamaha Artist, she is an Assistant Professor of Piano at the Cincinnati-College Conservatory of Music.



Alexander Scriabin's music was admired by Tolstoy as 'a sincere expression of genius' while the composer once described himself as 'all impulse, all desire...'. Rivalling Rachmaninov as a virtuoso musician, the colourful young pianist/composer Scriabin found inspiration in his hero Chopin, while adding Russian darkness to his *Impromptus* and sensuous passion to the technically demanding *Sonate-fantaisie*. This album of lesser-known works also includes the precocious 11 year old's *Canon in D minor*.

## Alexander SCRIABIN (1872-1915)

<b>1</b> <b>Sonate-fantaisie in G sharp minor (1886)</b>	<b>6:39</b>	<b>Two Impromptus, Op. 12 (1895)</b>	<b>9:13</b>
<b>2</b> <b>Three Pieces, Op. 2: No. 3. Impromptu alla mazurka (1887)</b>	<b>1:29</b>	<b>9</b> No. 1 in F sharp major	<b>5:02</b>
<b>Two Nocturnes, Op. 5 (1890)</b>	<b>6:14</b>	<b>10</b> No. 2 in B flat minor	<b>4:11</b>
<b>3</b> No. 1 in F sharp minor	<b>3:19</b>	<b>11</b> <b>Quasi-valse in F major, Op. 47 (1905)</b>	<b>1:33</b>
<b>4</b> No. 2 in A major	<b>2:55</b>	<b>12</b> <b>Three Pieces, Op. 49: No. 3. Rêverie (1905)</b>	<b>1:18</b>
<b>Two Impromptus à la Mazur, Op. 7 (1892)</b>	<b>7:27</b>	<b>13</b> <b>Scherzo, Op. 46 (1905)</b>	<b>1:31</b>
<b>5</b> No. 1 in G sharp minor	<b>4:14</b>	<b>Two Pieces, Op. 57 (1908)</b>	<b>3:09</b>
<b>6</b> No. 2 in F sharp major	<b>3:13</b>	<b>14</b> No. 1. Désir	<b>1:13</b>
<b>7</b> <b>Variations on a theme by Mlle Egorova (1887)</b>	<b>5:31</b>	<b>15</b> No. 2. Caresse dansée	<b>1:56</b>
<b>8</b> <b>Two Pieces for the Left Hand, Op. 9: No. 2. Nocturne in D flat major (1894)</b>	<b>5:50</b>	<b>16</b> <b>Canon in D minor (1883)</b>	<b>1:33</b>

## Soyeon Kate Lee, Piano

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