

SCRIABIN

Poem of Ecstasy, Op. 54

USSR Symphony Orchestra,
Evgeni SVETLANOV



Alexander Scriabin
***Poem of Ecstasy, Op. 54* (22:12)**

USSR Symphony Orchestra
Evgeni Svetlanov, conductor

Recorded in 1966.

Producer: **Larisa Abelyan**

Engineer: **Alexander Grosman**

Originally issued in 1966 as Melodiya D 018129-30

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

“Scriabin represents an attempt to escape the mediocrity of daily life... the anguished search for spiritual life absent from the world today.”

– **Marina Scriabina**, daughter, 1971

“How [can we] reconcile the Soviet view that Scriabin’s music foreshadowed the Revolution with the western picture of the theosophical effete and mad Scriabin whose music was filled with point-less mysticism?”

– **Faubion Bowers**, *Scriabin: A Biography*, 1996

“Come, people of the world, Let us sing praise to Art! Praise Art! Glorious Forever!”

– **Scriabin**, *Hymn to Art* – conclusion of Symphony No. 1, 1900

“He’s half out of his mind.”

– **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov**, on hearing Scriabin playing extracts from his *Poem of Ecstasy*

The double-headed eagle of the Romanov ruling dynasty paradoxically looked to the west and east: a symbol, perhaps, of both the progressive and also the reactionary tendencies of Russian politics and culture. This mixture of old and new could also be seen to characterise the music of **Alexander Scriabin** (1872-1915). At one level, Scriabin’s music looks backwards to nationalist composers like Balakirev and Tchaikovsky; but it also, in works like *The Poem of Ecstasy* (1908), anticipates radical trends of the twentieth century and beyond. These paradoxes may also reflect the personality of the composer himself.

Scriabin was born in Moscow the same year as Vaughan Williams in England but lived only half as long as the venerable British composer. His premature death at the age of forty-three robbed the world of probably the most gifted Russian composer of his generation. Scriabin’s mother died when he was about a year old and his father abandoned him to become an interpreter at the Russian Embassy in Turkey. He was brought up and hopelessly spoiled by his aunt, great-aunt and grandmother, influences which may well have affected his whole outlook on life.

Scriabin showed great musical gifts from an early age; his mother had been one of the most gifted pupils at the St Petersburg Conservatoire. During his youth he studied privately with the composer Taneyev, writing his first piano sonata at the age of 14. He subsequently entered the Moscow Conservatoire in 1888, where he was taught composition by Anton Arensky, who did not hold him in high regard, and piano by Vasily Safonov. Scriabin became a highly gifted concert pianist (second only to Rachmaninov at the Conservatoire) but probably due to his falling out with Arensky, whom he saw as giving special privileges to Rachmaninov, left the institution without gaining his diploma in composition. Despite this Scriabin embarked on a European concert-tour in 1895-6, sponsored by the wealthy publisher Mitrofan Belaiev and was appointed as Professor of Piano at the Moscow Conservatoire in 1898, a position which he found uncongenial.

Poem of Ecstasy is Scriabin’s most popular orchestral work and was played on the Soviet radio when cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin first blasted into space in 1961. This romantic/impressionist/symbolist work of 1908 is in one movement and represents a synthesis between a symphony and a tone poem. The composition of the work, which he once suggested might be his “Fourth Symphony” coincided with the abortive revolution of 1905 in Russia and, for a while, Scriabin became convinced that the revolutionaries shared his ideas but later came to the messianic conclusion that society could only be truly transformed through his own art.

It was composed during Scriabin’s most active period of involvement with the mystical Theosophical Society and may also show the influence of the composer’s synesthesia (the ability to see colours whilst hearing tones), with particular instruments corresponding to human

emotions and actions: flute (yearning), muted trombone (protest), muted horns (apprehension), and trumpets (will and self-assertion). In this massively-chorded work, which features a series of increasingly intense climaxes, Scriabin expresses the ecstasy (spiritual and sexual) of the creative spirit. The work was first performed in New York on 10th December 1908 conducted by Modest Altschuler. *The Poem of Ecstasy* can, perhaps, be seen as a prelude to Scriabin's planned epic "Mysterium", a week-long happening in the Himalayas, involving all the senses and culminating in the end of the world in a state of euphoric bliss. It wasn't to be. On a visit to London in 1914 the composer noticed a pimple on his lip which eventually became septic and caused his death in 1915, during the First World War. The composer Nikolai Myaskovsky (whose early orchestral works clearly show the influence of Scriabin) wrote that Scriabin's premature death was *'Terrible... and just as absurd as the War itself.'*

NOTES ON THE ARTIST

Conductor **Evgeny Svetlanov** (1928–2002) was the unsurpassed authority on Russian Romantic orchestral music in the last decades of the 20th century.

From 1965 until 2000, Svetlanov conducted the USSR State Symphony Orchestra, and recorded an extensive catalogue of Russian music, amassing the largest recorded legacy of any Russian conductor. At one point Svetlanov even claimed to have recorded "absolutely all the Russian symphonic music that has ever been written."

Svetlanov initially trained as a pianist and was also active as a composer throughout his career. From 1955, he conducted at the Bolshoi Theatre, and established a reputation for dramatic readings of Russian operas, always to high musical standards.

At the time of his appointment to the USSR State Symphony Orchestra, he had already worked with them for ten years, and the collaboration was an enduring success. Svetlanov was able to establish a leading international profile for the orchestra through extensive touring. By the 1980s, Svetlanov had also established significant connections with several Western orchestras leading to appointments with the London Symphony Orchestra, Residentie Orchestra and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra.

In 2000, Svetlanov was controversially sacked from his Moscow appointment by the Russian culture minister, Mikhail Shvydkoi, who cited the excessive time that the conductor was spending with foreign orchestras. However, three years after his death, the orchestra was renamed in the conductor's honour, and is known today as the State Academic Symphony Orchestra 'Evgeny Svetlanov'.

James Murray

Musical Concepts MC02994 5055354429941

2026 digital edition restored and remastered by **Gene Gaudette, Urlicht AudioVisual**

Design produced by **AliCat Design**

Reissue producer: **Christopher Todd Landor**

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