



SCRIABIN

Piano Music • 2

Allegro appassionato
Fantaisie in B minor
Impromptus

Soyeon Kate Lee, Piano

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

Piano Music - 2

Expressive beauty and refined originality are hallmarks of much of Scriabin's keyboard music. In an article published in *The Musical Times* in 1940, Scriabin's old colleague Leonid Sabaneev argued that these qualities entitle his smaller piano pieces to a permanent place in the musical repertory. He was confident that this would eventually happen and that Scriabin was destined for revaluation and revival. However, in order for this to take place, 'a psychological change is required: the businesslike, prosaic, realistic atmosphere of our days must some day be illuminated by the fires of a reviving romanticism; we shall grow tired of being eternally sober and sceptical.'

This notion of musical sobriety was long central to the upbringing of many performers, but from time to time certain artists kicked against this received orthodoxy. One such musician was the great Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter, who made a speciality of performing the works of Scriabin. He told the film maker Bruno Monsiegeon that 'Scriabin isn't the sort of composer whom you'd regard as your daily bread, but is a heavy liqueur on which you can get drunk periodically, a poetical drug...' Scriabin's short pieces are redolent of the scented salon and are very much like musical *apéritifs* or *amuse-bouches*. They stimulate one's senses in ways similar to a chef expressing big ideas in small bites.

Although the young Scriabin was formally educated at a cadet school in Moscow, he realised that a military career was not for him. Leaving the army early was out of the question, but his passion for music was so great that he devoted himself to studying piano and composition in parallel with his officer training. His composition teachers included Sergey Taneyev, who suggested that Scriabin should take piano lessons from Nikolai Zverev. A studio photograph shows Zverev surrounded by his star pupils, including Scriabin and Rachmaninov. Scriabin, in the front row, is conspicuous for being the only student in a cadet's uniform. Zverev was famous for hosting regular Sunday soirées, which were frequented by Moscow's leading intellectuals. The musical entertainment was provided by

Zverev's favourite students, including 'Scriabushka', as Scriabin was affectionately named because of his diminutive stature. Scriabin used to perform music by his great heroes Schumann and Chopin at these events, but he also tried out his own latest compositions, including the charming *Waltz in G sharp minor*, which he wrote around 1886, when he was no more than fourteen.

The intimate nature of much of Scriabin's early piano music was admirably suited to miniature genres such as the album leaf or *feuilleton d'album*. Although slight in dimensions and generally simple in style, album leaves were popular with many nineteenth-century composers including Schubert, Schumann, Liszt and Grieg. Closer to home, Scriabin could draw on examples by Russian composers such as Tchaikovsky and Anton Rubinstein for his inspiration. Album leaves were often written with specific friends or patrons in mind, which was the case when Scriabin composed his *Feuilleton d'album de Monighetti*, a beautiful Chopinesque miniature in A flat dating from 1889. The Monighetti family was of Swiss-Italian extraction, and the most famous member was the architect Ippolit Monighetti, who had designed several important buildings for the Romanovs. Scriabin returned periodically to writing album leaves, and two representative examples, dating from around 1904 and 1905, are the contemplative *Feuilleton d'album in F sharp* and the *Feuilleton d'album in E flat*, Op. 45, No. 1, which is the first number of a set of *Trois Morceaux*.

There is delicious irony in the fate of the *Fugue in E minor*, which Scriabin composed in 1891 or 1892, because in the conservatoires of Russia this work often features as a textbook example of 'correct' fugal writing, yet its very existence owes more to luck than judgement. Scriabin's composition teacher, Anton Arensky, had set his students the task of writing ten fugues over the summer holidays of 1891. Rachmaninov fulfilled all Arensky's requirements and passed with flying colours, but Scriabin failed because he only got round to writing this single example.

The relationship between an early un-numbered piano sonata in E flat minor and the *Allegro appassionato*, Op. 4, dating from about 1892, is fascinating. Although the two works differ considerably from a structural point of view, a distinct sense of overlap remains. During the three or four years separating them, Scriabin had tightened up his compositional style in the interests of good pianistic writing. In effect, he condensed his sonata into this single-movement freestanding *Allegro appassionato*. In outline, some of the thematic material partially survived the overhaul, but because Scriabin no longer felt bound by the traditional constraints of sonata form, he introduced a virtuosic section before the final coda.

Another miniature form at which Scriabin excelled in his youth was the *impromptu*, and he composed several short sets of these in the 1890s. The *Impromptus*, Op. 10 and Op. 14, dating from 1894 and 1895, demonstrate that the tonal language of his hero Chopin remained a clear inspiration. Nevertheless, with their occasional flashes of fire, they give a clear hint of the Russian darkness that was to become a hallmark of the mature composer.

In 1916, the year after Scriabin's death, A. Eaglefield Hull published a detailed conspectus of Scriabin's piano works in *The Musical Quarterly*. He wrote that they are works of 'fancy, delight and beauty' that every pianist should know. Of the *Allegro de concert*, Op. 18, he points out that it was composed at Vitznau on Lake Lucerne as a souvenir of happy times in the summer of 1896.

Throughout history there have been a surprising number of occasions when composers have failed to recognise their own music. This happened to Scriabin. One day he was busy in his Moscow flat, half listening to his friend Leonid Sabaneev playing the piano in the next room.

He approved of the work's brooding opening, melodic abundance and generally virtuosic style. After a while, curiosity got the better of him and he called out, 'Who wrote that? It sounds a bit familiar.' 'It's your Fantasy', came the response. 'What Fantasy?' It was the *Fantaisie in B minor*, Op. 28, which Scriabin had composed several years earlier, around the turn of the century.

One of Scriabin's strengths as a composer was his ability to create a multitude of moods. He did this to great success in his two sets of pieces, Op. 51 (1906) and Op. 56 (1908). *Fragilité*, Op. 51, No. 1, is a limpid tenor melody for the left hand accompanied by delicate chords in the piano's upper register, while *Danse languide*, Op. 51, No. 4, suggests a close relationship with *Le Poème de l'extase*, Op. 54, Scriabin's symphonic poem inspired by Theosophy. In *Ironies*, Op. 56, No. 2, Scriabin contrasts vivacity and amorousness, while in *Nuances*, Op. 56, No. 3, he calls on the musical style to be *fondue* and *velouté* (melting and velvety).

Anthony Short

Continuing the discovery of Scriabin's lesser-known works, this album presents a mixture of some of his larger scale works, such as the ecstatic *Fantaisie*, Op. 28, and some of the smaller gems – brief, fleeting, and perfumed. This album is dedicated to the two greatest friends and anchors of my life: my sister, Soeyon Lee, and my husband and invaluable musical companion, Ran Dank.

Soeyon 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, the Ravinia Festival, the National Auditorium, Madrid and the Herbst Theatre, San Francisco. 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.

Expressive allure and refined originality are the hallmarks of much of Alexander Scriabin's piano music. Miniatures such as the *Feuillets d'album* (album leaves) and the *Impromptus*, draw on examples by composers including Chopin, Schumann and Tchaikovsky. The *Fantaisie*, Op. 28 is notable for its brooding opening, melodic abundance and virtuoso style, while the *Opus 51* and *56* collections create a multiplicity of moods. The great Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter regarded Scriabin's music as 'a poetical drug', and contemporary commentators described it as 'full of fancy, delight and beauty'. The first of this two-volume collection can be heard on Naxos 8.573527.

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1 Allegro de concert, Op. 18 (1896) 6:58	9 Two Impromptus, Op. 10: No. 2 in A major (1894) 3:26
2 Feuille d'album in F sharp major, Op. posth. (c. 1904) 1:00	10 Four Pieces, Op. 56: No. 3. Nuances (1908) 1:24
3 Feuille d'album de Monighetti in A flat major, Op. posth. (1889) 0:46	11 Two Impromptus, Op. 14: No. 1 in B major (1895) 2:55
4 Three Pieces, Op. 45: No. 1. Feuille d'album (c. 1905) 1:28	12 Four Pieces, Op. 51: No. 4. Danse languide (1906) 0:53
5 Four Pieces, Op. 56: No. 2. Ironies (1908) 2:47	13 Two Impromptus, Op. 14: No. 2 in F sharp minor (1895) 4:17
6 Allegro appassionato, Op. 4 (c. 1892) 11:22	14 Waltz in G sharp minor, Op. Posth (c. 1886) 2:45
7 Two Impromptus, Op. 10: No. 1 in F sharp minor (1894) 4:54	15 Fantaisie in B minor, Op. 28 (c. 1900) 10:19
8 Four Pieces, Op. 51: No. 1. Fragilité (1906) 2:14	16 Fugue in E minor (c. 1891) 3:18

Soyeon Kate Lee, Piano

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