

SEATTLE SYMPHONY THOMAS DAUSGAARD

R. STRAUSS

ALSO SPRACH ZARATHUSTRA

SCRIABIN

THE POEM OF ECSTASY

RICHARD STRAUSS*Also sprach Zarathustra*

("Thus Spake Zarathustra"), TrV 176, Op. 30

1	<i>Einleitung</i> ("Introduction")—	1:38
2	<i>Von den Hinterweltlern</i> ("Of the Backworldsmen")—	3:16
3	<i>Von der großen Sehnsucht</i> ("Of the Great Longing")—	1:45
4	<i>Von den Freuden und Leidenschaften</i> ("Of Joys and Passions")—	2:02
5	<i>Das Grablied</i> ("The Song of the Grave")—	2:30
6	<i>Von der Wissenschaft</i> ("Of Science")—	4:26
7	<i>Der Genesende</i> ("The Convalescent")—	5:10
8	<i>Das Tanzlied</i> ("The Dance-Song")—	7:14
9	<i>Nachtwandlerlied</i> ("Song of the Night Wanderer")	4:06

ALEXANDER SCRIABIN

10	<i>Le Poème de l'extase</i> ("The Poem of Ecstasy") Op. 54	20:16
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TOTAL TIME 52:23**SEATTLESYMPHONY.ORG**

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SEATTLE SYMPHONY

Led by Music Director Thomas Dausgaard and recognized as one of the “most vital American orchestras” (NPR), the Seattle Symphony is internationally acclaimed for its inventive programming, community-minded initiatives and superb recordings on the Seattle Symphony Media label. With a strong commitment to new music and a legacy of over 150 recordings, the orchestra has garnered five Grammy Awards, 26 Grammy nominations, two Emmy Awards and was named Gramophone’s 2018 Orchestra of the Year. In recent years, recordings made by the orchestra with Thomas Dausgaard have earned critical acclaim and international honors, including a 2017 Gramophone Award nomination for Mahler’s Symphony No. 10, and a 2019 Best Orchestral Performance Grammy Award nomination for Nielsen’s Symphonies Nos. 3 and 4 — the first installment in the orchestra’s cycle of Carl Nielsen’s symphonies. The Symphony performs in Benaroya Hall in the heart of downtown Seattle from September through July, reaching over 500,000 people annually through live performances and radio broadcasts.





THOMAS DAUSGAARD CONDUCTOR

Music Director of the Seattle Symphony, Danish conductor Thomas Dausgaard is esteemed for his creativity and innovative programming, the excitement of his live performances, and his extensive catalogue of critically acclaimed recordings. He is also Chief Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Conductor Laureate of the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, and Honorary Conductor of the Orchestra della Toscana and the Danish National Symphony Orchestra. Performing internationally with many of the world's leading orchestras, Dausgaard has appeared at the BBC Proms, Edinburgh International Festival, the Salzburg Festival, Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival, Tanglewood and the George Enescu Festival; and with the Munich Philharmonic, Berlin Konzerthaus Orchester, Vienna Symphony, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and the Philharmonia Orchestra. In North America he has worked with the New York Philharmonic, The Cleveland Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and with the Toronto and Montreal symphonies. Guest engagements in Asia and Australia have included performances with the New Japan Philharmonic, Hong Kong Philharmonic, and the Sydney and Melbourne symphonies. Among many honors, Dausgaard has been awarded the Cross of Chivalry by the Queen of Denmark and elected to the Royal Academy of Music in Sweden.

SEATTLE SYMPHONY

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2019–2020 Season

■ Principal on Scriabin

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2019–2020 Season

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 Gunnar Folsom, percussion
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 Sophie Baird-Daniel, harp
 Christina Siemens, keyboard

STRAUSS & SRIABIN

BY THOMAS DAUSGAARD

How to express our beliefs most powerfully? Is there an alternative to expressing them in words? Can music communicate truths and philosophy? Two extraordinary orchestral works composed around the turn of the 20th century stand out with this ambition: Alexander Scriabin's *The Poem of Ecstasy* and Richard Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Scriabin proclaims how ultimate freedom is to be able to say "I am" — while Strauss salutes Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation of Man being a bridge to a bigger goal: the self-reflecting Superman as the meaning of our life on the earth.

Scriabin combines his music with a poem, originally called "Orgiastic Poem." It describes how the Spirit dualistically "surrenders to the bliss of love" yet "lingers in torment" — pain and pleasure being integral parts of this poetically described sexual experience. Reflections notated in his notebooks at this time include: "I am God", and in *The Poem of Ecstasy* he crescendos into: "I am Ecstasy," "Spirit at the summit of its being feels endless tides of divine power of free will," and ends with "And thus the universe resounds with joyful cry I AM!" The power of a sexual experience, however dualistic, sets him free to be himself.

Strauss protected himself from expectations of transforming Nietzsche's complex thought world directly into a musical language by inscribing on his score's front page "freely after Nietzsche." Not dissimilarly, Nietzsche had taken the ancient historical figure of Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra) and placed in his mouth words of wisdom

mainly by Nietzsche himself. Out of the text, Strauss distilled a description of Man's evolution from a state of unawareness, dependent on religious institutions, science and self-indulgence — to a heightened awareness (that of a Superman) symbolized by the hermit philosopher Zarathustra.

So, how to communicate such formidable concepts in music? The two monumental works share a late Romantic soundworld (Strauss being the more experimental) of a gigantic orchestra, producing larger-than-life sounds, yet within a highly compact form. The extensive length of another visionary's works, Gustav Mahler (whose second symphony graced Strauss' writing desk), was gone, replaced by concentrated power and free symphonic shaping. Scriabin and Strauss would inspire a host of composers after them, like Karol Szymanowski, Jean Sibelius, Carl Nielsen and Igor Stravinsky. Both write passages of great complexity — though Scriabin would claim that "unlike Strauss, all my voices can be heard." Both also share the basic tonality of C and depict the life-giving event of the sunrise — Strauss with the famously striking trumpet-dominated opening, Scriabin with the trumpet symbolizing the cockcrow near the beginning.

Scriabin's work is dominated by harmonies creating an endless sense of expectation — for me not unlike what Wagner explored much earlier in his *Tristan und Isolde* prelude. Heaping unresolved harmonies on each other ultimately breaks them down to an impression of timelessness. In this state of timelessness the soul can be open to the most minute changes of mood and sensation; and thus the erotic music of *The Poem of Ecstasy* swings capriciously in all layers between agitation and lethargy, somehow

counteracting each other until the majestic ending gathers all the threads in a huge build-up: Scriabin's musical orgasm.

Strauss on the other hand builds his work very clearly, describing Man's evolution by using headlines from Nietzsche's poem to define distinct musical sections. Wagner-inspired leitmotifs create coherence, like the *nature-motif* (C-G-C of the sunrise), the *search-motif* (the first pizzicato in the low strings — and in contrasting B-tonality), the *disgust-motif* (tritone and chromaticism). Unlike Scriabin, his work ends as an unresolved mystery: however much we humans try to find meaning, we are subject to the most powerful force on earth: nature, musically expressed through the *nature-motif*, ends the work in understated quiet.

Does the earth have a tone? Strauss picks a soft rumbling low C as the note from which the sunrise can begin: three successively louder *nature-motifs* in the trumpets are answered by Man's questioning, dramatic changes between major and minor - Man's search for wisdom has begun. Some of Strauss' most intoxicating music is heard when Zarathustra denounces the earlier stages of mankind, like the section:

Of the Backworldsmen. Nietzsche describes how the most primitive and naive form of human intellect has invented God, and created a dogma stopping man from free spiritual evolution. Part of what attracted Strauss to Nietzsche was likely his criticism of church dogma. Yet Strauss in no way denied that divine powers were at play when composing, as in this quote from 1890: "I realize that the ability to have such [musical] ideas register in my consciousness is a Divine gift. It is a mandate from God, a charge

entrusted to my keeping, and I feel that my highest duty is to make the most of this gift — to grow and expand." The ecstatic music in this section portrays the devout believers and the naive emotional comfort 'man-created' God gives. Strauss divides the strings into 16 parts, and this marks the beginning of Strauss' treatment of the orchestra as an overgrown chamber ensemble, something he would do in most subsequent works. He could easily have made a sarcastic mocking out of the congregational music, but to his great honour he creates authentically ecstatic music. This is much in line with Nietzsche's idea of striving for something beyond "good" or "bad," as that division is seen as a concept belonging to religious dogma. Instead, Strauss introduces short signal-like quotes (on the organ, of course!) of the Gregorian plainchants, "Credo" and "Magnificat," pointedly surrounding the section:

Of the Great Longing. Man's longing to free himself from this religious superstition is expressed in high-flying violins, answered by the *nature-motif* and more of the congregational music. But an aggressive fast theme gradually undermines it all and leads to:

Of Joys and Passions. Dark music paints Man's emotionally self-indulgent life. Again, the music is authentically passionate and riveting, as if not to paint this stage in evolution as "bad." Nevertheless, a protest against all this indulgence is proclaimed by the trombones howling out the *disgust-motif*, which gradually breaks down this section into a more chamber music passage, called:

Song of the Grave. Here fragments of previous melodies seem to sink the music into darkness, to prepare for the sinister section:

Of Science. Science is seen as a surrogate for God, and Strauss musically portrays this with the most learned and potentially driest form, the fugue. But not only that: the theme itself (based on the *nature-motif*) is treated to display more learned aspects, such as being 12-tone-based, and incorporating three different types of rhythms and five different tonalities within its mere four bars. It builds up mysteriously from the back desks of the cellos and basses, and eventually leads to:

The Convalescent where the fugue is played by the whole orchestra, accelerating into a terrifying restatement of the *nature-motif*. Here Zarathustra supposedly rushes out of his cave to proclaim his findings, only to find that no-one really understands him. It is followed by a striking silence, and it sounds like the piece could end here — however we are just halfway! Low grumbling music suggests the collapse of Zarathustra after his week-long fasting, until - with a stratospheric rising passage in the strings - he rushes out again, now to share his ultimate vision: “Master yourself, develop your inner powers!”

Fanfares, bird-sounds, cockcrows, *search-* and *disgust-* (now humoristic) *motifs* lead to *The Dance-Song* — a Viennese waltz led by the solo-violin, personifying the obtained wisdom of Zarathustra. In a huge build-up, *search-* and *disgust-motifs* themes interrupt each other, until the:

Song of the Night Wanderer where the midnight bell chimes twelve and the music finally calms down. What follows next is one of the most magical and transcendent passages from Strauss’ pen: the high-flying theme in the violins signifying Man’s longing

to free himself is played very slowly and dreamily, eventually transforming into a kind of music of the spheres. Just as we think we might have reached a state of sublime insight, surprisingly the *nature-motif* from the very beginning returns in the mysterious pizzicatos of the low strings against a gloomy chord in the trombones. Three final quiet pizzicatos leave us ruminating about Man versus Superman — without giving us any easy answers.

Scriabin loved Strauss’ music, and some of the sensuality of *The Poem of Ecstasy* has Straussian overtones. But Scriabin often uses impressionistic effects to create a more dreamlike haze around the music, enabling us to imagine scents, tastes and colours — even if we don’t share Scriabin’s own synesthesia — the unique merging of senses with which he was gifted.

The *Poem* begins slowly and softly, as if half-asleep in early morning, until the cock crows (trumpet) and announces that the day has begun. Typically for this work the music goes back to its half-conscious state, and the love-scene begins. At the top of the score Scriabin wrote: “Mysterious forces, I call you to life” — and in the music we are called to life by another trumpet fanfare to be played “avec une noble et douce majesté” (“with a noble and soft majesty”) which recurs with ever new accompaniment and intensity. Poetic tempo and character markings include “très parfumé avec une ivresse toujours croissante presque en delire” (“perfumed with an ever-growing euphoria almost to delirium”), “avec une volupté de plus en plus extatique” (“with a sensuality more and more ecstatic”), or simply “Allegro Drammatico” or “Tragico.” The *Poem* basically falls in two halves/love scenes roughly mirroring each other, with the second leading to the

magnificent coda where after a brief *Luftpause*, it crescendos slowly to the final chord.

Could Scriabin have composed an *Also sprach Zarathustra*? We know that he owned, read and loved Nietzsche's poem. For Scriabin, the Superman symbolized a craving for the extraordinary: "Not only must music be supermusic to mean anything, but everything in the world must excel itself to be itself." In a way Scriabin's many extraordinary compositions are reflections of just that, having a kernel of Zarathustra's vision for "spiritual freedom" as well as Strauss' vision to "grow and expand."

Could Strauss have composed a *Poem of Ecstasy*? My guess is that he might have found a whole work about ecstasy too much of a good thing, and in Scriabin's *Poem* something too self-indulgent belonging to Man rather than to Superman. But: the most memorable and touching parts of Strauss' works often express ecstasy, whether it is ecstasy of love, like in *Don Juan*, *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ein Heldenleben* — or whether it is ecstasy of death, like in *Death and Transfiguration*, *Salome* and *Four Last Songs*.

Why do we need these works today? Both Strauss and Scriabin were in a way Zarathustrian Supermen, as they exceeded themselves, searching for spiritual freedom — and yet very human, as they poured out their expressions of ecstasy. Both searched for answers to essential questions. Who are we and who do we want to be? Our present time challenges us to face those questions anew for ourselves. With this recording, I invite you to listen to the music of Strauss and Scriabin offering their answers — may you become inspired to find your own.

The Seattle Symphony is grateful to Joan Watjen for her generous support of **SEATTLE SYMPHONY MEDIA** CDs in memory of her husband Craig.

Recorded in the S. Mark Taper Foundation Auditorium, Benaroya Hall, Seattle, Washington.

R. Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra* was recorded live in concert September 14, 2019.
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Scriabin's *The Poem of Ecstasy* was presented as part of the Delta Air Lines Masterworks Season.

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