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## The Evolution of Scriabin's Language Through the Evolution of the Mystic Chord

### ABSTRACT

In this paper the evolution of Scriabin's musical language will be discussed with particular attention to the development of the mystic chord. Late Scriabin is recognized as being post-tonal. Yet, there is no clear point when Scriabin abandoned tonality and started composing post-tonal music. As a matter of fact the mystic chord that characterizes the late music has roots in his earlier compositions. Starting with a preference for the Neapolitan chord, Scriabin transitions to an emphasis on the augmented sixth chord, to finally merge this with the dominant seventh chord in a specific voicing. This gradual transition from early tonal music under the influence of Chopin, until his remarkable personal style at the end will be presented. The emphasis is therefore on the gradual transition from tonality to post-tonality. The aim is: first to bridge the traditional rupture between tonality and post-tonality; and second to look at Scriabin's post-tonal music in a different perspective. While the traditional tonality has been transformed, there are some remains of the old language that still shape the post-tonal compositions. This may bring a new perspective on how to approach the late music of Scriabin.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this presentation the evolution of Scriabin's musical language is discussed by focusing on the development of the mystic chord. Before starting it might be good to consider the goal of this study. Scriabin's language has been studied; in particular by James Baker in his book *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (Baker 1986). For the early music, Baker relied on the Schenkerian method; and for the late atonal music he used the Pitch Class Set Theory. While the reasons to do so are obvious, it also challenges the perception of Scriabin's oeuvre as a whole. Scriabin did not break away from tonality as for example Schoenberg did. Scriabin evolved gradually from a chromatic post-Chopin idiom to music that goes far beyond classical tonality challenging our concept of harmony and tonality.

At the same time, there is the notion of the mystic chord. It appears in relation to Scriabin's late music, often explained as an altered dominant but without much context of where it came from or how it can explain the late music. In addition, Vasilis Kallis argued recently that there is not one mystic chord but multiple variations (Kallis 2008).

Both facts: first that Scriabin's musical language shows a continuous evolution; and second that the mystic chord is not used to clarify Scriabin's late music; these two premises are setting the stage for the current presentation. Specifically the mystic chord will be studied in twofold: first, what is the evolution toward the mystic chord starting from the early compositions; and second, how does that inform us about the musical language of Scriabin's late music.

This approach is intentionally limited as needed for a short presentation. Needless to say that this is not an exhaustive

study of Scriabin's language. The use of the Pitch Class Set Theory, and in particular the octatonic scale is not used here. That is not to dismiss the value of these contributions; that is only because this presentation is taking the mystic chord as the focus for the reasons explained above. Therefore it is my hope that this presentation can be complementary to the existing literature on Scriabin.

### 2. TRACES OF THE MYSTIC CHORD IN EARLY SCRIBIN

Tracing the development of the Mystic Chord(s), it seems — with hindsight — that several chords converged into this chord. Therefore, these can be considered the origins of the Mystic Chord(s):

- dominant seventh with diminished fifth;
- augmented sixth chord, especially the French — the French augmented sixth is enharmonically equivalent to the altered dominant seventh chord with diminished fifth;
- the Neapolitan chord in root position moving to V, establishing a triton-relationship in the bass;
- the use of non-chord tones.

Op. 11 No. 2 shows these chords in action.

### 3. EMERGING ASPECTS OF THE MYSTIC CHORD

With examples from preludes Op. 33, 35, and 37 the tonal exploration of Scriabin will be discussed with special attention to:

- chromatically altered pitches to create common tones, especially from the Neapolitan chord to V<sup>7</sup>;
- unusual long durations for chords of tension such as the French augmented sixth chord;
- adventurous resolutions of dissonant chords, as well as a preference for a triton movement in the bass;
- rearranging chromatically altered dominant chords in fourths, while they still resolve as dominants.

All of these aspects create an ambiguous sense of tonality. However, the tonality is always clarified by the use of cadences. Scriabin has kept this aspect of tonality intact during this stage of his evolution.

### 4. DEVELOPING THE MYSTIC CHORD

In examples from Op. 45 and 48 we can see how the different tendencies that have been discussed so far begin to converge into the sonority of the mystic chord. In addition Scriabin starts to develop a musical grammar around his favourite chords. The traditional tonal structures still provide the general framework, especially for the final cadence, but more and more Scriabin avoids the goal oriented tonal resolutions and finds new ways to create harmonic progressions around the sonorities he is exploring.

Scriabin uses chromatic alterations and non-chord tones to embellish his favourite chords, such as the French augmented sixth and dominant seventh chords. At this stage, the non-chord tones become so important to the sonority that it is hard to not consider them part of the chord. Therefore his writing creates an ambiguity: while it is clear that the harmonies are derived from straightforward classical progressions, the result is far more complex. We can wonder how relevant the underlying tonal implications are in these compositions.

In addition to the complexity of the chords, Scriabin is also beginning to build a grammar from his favourite sonorities. He does so by using chords with more and more common tones, especially from the Neapolitan chord to  $V^7$  with the triton in the bass. These two chords are very typical for Scriabin and allow him to develop a different harmonic sense: not goal oriented but rather a harmonic agglomerate of two chords that share several pitches as common tones.

Before concluding this paragraph, it is worth to refer to an observation made by James Baker in his book *The Music of Alexander Scriabin*. Baker remarked that in the so-called second period, Scriabin seemed to follow a pattern where he begins a composition with dissonant chords and ambiguous harmonic functionality, inevitably leading to a clear and strong cadence at the end (Baker 1986). Gradually, the ambiguity that Scriabin developed in the beginning of these compositions is challenging the traditional goal-directed harmonic motion and will replace — later on — even the final cadence. Therefore, the evolution of Scriabin is indeed gradual and has no point of rupture away from tonality. Scriabin developed his language from tonality and found gradually a very personal voice that took him beyond the borders of tonality.

## 5. THE MYSTIC CHORD AND THE LATE STYLE

### 5.1 Op. 65 No. 3

This is a remarkable composition: the triton relationship of the  $\flat II-V$  has completely eroded and has become a self-contained block of two alternating chords. If there still was a remnant of goal directed motion in the preludes of Op. 48, it has completely disappeared by two chords that are alternating. As observed before, common tones play an important role in Scriabin's language. In this example the triton in the first chord (B–F) is kept in common with the second chord (F– $\flat C$ ). Therefore the strongest interval of tension does not resolve but is re-contextualized by changing the bass note. The evolution that we have observed seems to culminate in this composition where triton-related chords are establishing a self-contained harmonic unit. When Scriabin changes the harmony he keeps this triton-related alternation part of the harmony throughout the composition. In addition at this point in his evolution, this harmonic procedure has completely replaced the tonal syntax and the final cadence is replaced with chords consistent with the beginning.

It is also worth pointing out that Scriabin has abandoned the key signature. This can be seen as abandoning traditional harmonic practice. But it could also be as practical as a simplification of the use of accidentals. A sense of a key centre — one could argue — still remains, albeit realized in a different way.

### 5.2 Op. 74 No. 1

As the final example, we will examine the first prelude of Scriabin's final opus. Here we find that triton-related chords as self-contained blocks are the goal of the harmonic development; see measures 3–4 and measures 11–16. It seems that the alternating chords have replaced what used to be a (tonal) cadence. In his earlier music, Scriabin often transposed the beginning a perfect fifth up or down, even in his experimental middle period — see for example Op. 48 No. 1. Here that remnant of tonality has also vanished: at measure 8 we find a triton transposition of the beginning; leading interestingly to the same harmonic field as end goal.

It is striking to see how Scriabin begins this composition with harmonies that are a minor third apart, repeated until it reaches the goal of the triton-related alternating chords. If Scriabin is indeed still working from dissonance to clarity, as he did in his middle period, that would indicate indeed that the alternating triton-related chords have now acquired the status of harmonic consonance. Quite an astonishing evolution.

## 6. CONCLUSION

From favourite chords and sonorities, Scriabin radically evolved his harmonic language. Starting out in a Chopinesque manner, Scriabin developed a preference for specific sonorities such as the augmented sixth chord; the dominant seventh chord with diminished fifth; the Neapolitan chord in root position — going to  $V$  emphasizing the triton in the bass; and non-chord tones. From these chromatic chords, the harmonic progressions began to erode and gradually lost their tonal direction in particular due to an increase of common tones between the Neapolitan chord and the following  $V^7$  chord.

While non-chord tones were important in the early music, gradually they became part of the harmony as Scriabin merged all of his favourite chords into a singular sonority, often referred to as the mystic chord.

Typical for the late style is the use of alternating triton-related chords that create self-contained blocks of harmony. Possibly these are derived from the Neapolitan chord in root position going to  $V^7$ , however any goal directed motion is gone and Scriabin has moved his musical grammar beyond the boundaries of tonality.

## KEYWORDS

Scriabin, Mystic Chord.

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