

SCRIABIN: Symphonies 1+5

Alisa Kolosova, mz; Alexey Dolgov, t; Kirill Gerstein,
p; Oslo Philharmonic & Choir/ Vasily
Petrenko
LAWO 1160—69 minutes

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) can be thought of as the ultimate “peace composer”. He believed that music—and his music in particular— could bring people together and lift them into a kind of artistic cosmic synergy. He would do so with the help of a work he would compose called *Mysterium*. It would be played at the foot of the Himalayas and lift minds from mundane existence. His *First Symphony* (1900) was an early part of that project. Scriabin drew it partly out of Russian symbolism— “implicitly in the first five movements and explicitly in the final movement’s verbal tribute to the unfathomable greatness of art” (annotator Thomas Erma Moller)—and from Richard Wagner, particularly *Tristan and Isolde*. As modern sounding as all that may seem, the *First Symphony* is a late romantic and tonal work, reflecting Wagner, Strauss, and perhaps Rachmaninoff. Its six movements vary from lyrical, intimate (particularly the caressing *Lento*), elegant in sections suggesting a ballroom in the nostalgic second *Allegro*, and Mendelssohnian in the *Vivace*. The finale enters a larger world that it expands further.

Scriabin’s *First* somehow lends itself to good performances. This newcomer with the Oslo Symphony and its music director Vasily Petrenko sits at or very near the top. I have not liked what I have heard of Petrenko’s Shostakovich series, but I admire his Elgar, and the Scriabin calls for similar interpretive skills. As with his Elgar, Petrenko seems to have an instinct for where the music wants to go, and he takes it there unerringly and without mannerisms. His reading is not only well thought out and executed; it breathes in a way that makes it seem as if the score is playing itself.

After writing two fairly conventional symphonies, Scriabin’s musical language grew more complex. The three that followed were his “Poem” symphonies, Nos. 3 to 5: *Divine Poem*, *Poem of Ecstasy*, and *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*. *Prometheus* is in one movement and scored for large orchestra, piano solo, and a choir that sings vowel sounds. Scriabin also added a “color organ” to the mix. To my knowledge, no one has produced such a thing in performance, though some groups have tried projecting colors on a screen or something similar. The idea was to create a fusion of the senses through music, something Scriabin was able to do naturally through a genetic condition known as synesthesia. Somehow that would create a cosmic unity that would allow humans to respond to *Mysterium*.

Prometheus can be thought of as a symphony, tone poem, or piano concerto. Its tonality uses whole-tone scales and tends to avoid the feeling of major and minor. Most of it is based on what has become known as Scriabin’s “mystic chord” (A, D-sharp, G, C-sharp, F-sharp, and B). The chord is heard at the very beginning, and from it emerges most of the tonality, themes, and harmonies of the work, save for the final chord, which is in F-sharp major. *Prometheus* is a much more modern work than the *First Symphony*, with its infusion of Debussy and Stravinsky, particularly *Firebird*, though it is hard to tell which way the influence flowed, if there was any flow at all. *Prometheus* is very different from the *First Symphony*, but Petrenko’s performance is just as unerring as his treatment of the earlier work. In fact, its facility and light touch bring out the *Firebird* similarities more than usual.

The beautiful sound on both recordings fits the performances perfectly. Both readings sound more natural than weightier ones by conductors like Muti, Gergiev, Ashkenazy, and Maazel. They are closest to the very good Segerstam with the Stockholm Philharmonic, with Petrenko more unerring and natural and the Oslo Philharmonic slightly more quick on the response. The chorus is good, and the Russian tone of both soloists fits perfectly. I had the same response to it that Don O’Connor did reviewing Petrenko’s Scriabin Third and Fourth when he called the orchestra a “delightful surprise, responding to every nuance of Petrenko’s vision of the music. This especially emerges in some brass parts, which often sound blatty, but here sound noble.” He placed those readings at “the top of the heap”, and these join them (M/A 2016).

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American Record Guide