

SCRIABIN Symphony No. 1¹ and No. 5, “Prometheus: The Poem of Fire”² • Vasily Petrenko, cond; ¹Alisa Kolosova (mez); ¹Alexey Dolgov (ten); ²Kirill Gerstein (pn); Oslo P Ch & O • LAWO 1160 (69:33)



Scriabin concentrated his output of five symphonies between 1900 and 1910, if you count *Prometheus* as a symphony rather than a tone poem with solo piano. His resistance to correct symphonic form raised objections in his day—Liadov premiered only the first five movements of the First Symphony, considering the choral finale not performable. A retrospective gaze has been more tolerant, and Scriabin’s individuality and intense harmonies count for him more than his loose organization and free-form development sections count against. In a sense all of his symphonic works could be called poems of ecstasy.

Vasily Petrenko is the latest in the lineage of Russian conductors on disc who naturally breathe in the perfumed Romantic fervor of Scriabin, with two prominent outliers in Leopold Stokowski and Riccardo Muti. The present release is the third and final installment of Petrenko’s cycle from Oslo that delivered an exceptionally fine Symphony No. 2 and Piano Concerto in 2017 (reviewed by me in *Fanfare* 41:4 and by Jerry Dubins and Raymond Tuttle in 41:5, everyone responding enthusiastically). If any single disc in recent memory has done more for both the symphony and concerto, I’m not aware of it.

In an interview at the outset of the series Petrenko commented that “once you’ve found all the transparency in this music, it really starts to shine.” By implication the music needs to be saved from its extreme voluptuousness. That certainly pertains here in two performances that avoid congestion and over-heatedness. Petrenko makes the music sound beautiful and poetic from bar to bar, which is about all anyone can do in the amorphous luxuriance of Symphony No. 1. Its wandering chromaticism feels like an ambitious young composer, steeped in late Romanticism, who wants to write an orchestral *Tristan*; but without Wagner’s genius, the persistent refusal to resolve the harmony becomes wearing.

As much as it has been criticized, my favorite movement is the “hymn to art” finale, based on Scriabin’s own rhapsodic text—as a free-standing 12-minute cantata, it is quite stirring. This performance benefits from lovely singing by Russian mezzo Alisa Kolosova and lyric tenor Alexey Dolgov, who intertwine in what is essentially a love duet. For rapturous atmosphere we could be in the world of Rachmaninoff’s *Spring* cantata. The woodwind solos are delicately handled, and the Oslo Philharmonic Choir, extravagantly called upon only in the last four minutes of the symphony, is excellent and recorded with clarity. The only regrettable note is the absence of texts and translation.

Another high-profile Scriabin First Symphony I’ve reviewed was from Valery Gergiev and the London Symphony (LSO Live), and I wouldn’t hasten to call this new account superior. The London Symphony is a world-class orchestra, the recorded sound has more presence, and Gergiev shows real depth of feeling for the music.

Prometheus is a prime exhibit of Scriabin’s late aesthetic, in which he wanted colors to expand the mystical import of his music; the instrumentation calls for a “color organ” to project a visual dimension based on the colors the composer associated with each note. The

part is notated in the score but rarely encountered (for a fascinating high-tech realization, see a YouTube video by the Yale Symphony). A good deal of arcana lies behind Scriabin's technique of composition here, but the effect on the ear is of a variant, more dissonant and impenetrable, version of his early chromaticism. You are immersed in an exotic sound world where abstractly related chords and phrases wash over you.

Kirill Gerstein was exceptional in unraveling the solo part in the Piano Concerto, and he reappears in *Prometheus* to very good effect with powerful, convincing playing. But the piano part is quite enigmatic, and one can be forgiven if it sounds like a miscellany of chords, passagework, trills, and improvised commentary on the orchestral part. Between them, Petrenko and Gerstein clarify the score, and transparency is again the key. (Any reference to the Greek myth of Prometheus bringing fire to mortals is tangential.) There's more mystery and luxurious playing in the performance with the Berlin Philharmonic led by Abbado with Martha Argerich as pianist (Sony). There's also an Arthaus video from 1992 with the same forces and lighting effects that Peter J. Rabinowitz considered "slightly tame" in 31:4. Abbado focuses on the Impressionist side of the orchestral writing, while Petrenko is more dramatic, if that's a deciding factor.

Very little of Scriabin's orchestral music beyond the *Poem of Ecstasy* has gained a foothold in the standard repertoire outside Russia, and I'm not sure I'd want multiple copies of much else. But Petrenko's cycle maintains its high quality throughout and has one disc that's outstanding, the one with Symphony No. 2 and the Piano Concerto. I'd start there myself.

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