

TRACING COLOR IN SCRIBIN'S PIANO MUSIC:  
HOW MINDFULNESS OF COLORS CAN ENHANCE THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE  
COMPOSER'S MUSICAL LANGUAGE IN HIS LATE PIANO POEMS

By

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(Under the Direction of Evgeny Rivkin)

ABSTRACT

The *Poem of Fire: Prometheus*, a symphony by Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), was a revolutionary work of its time. It was an early attempt at intersensory artwork that included colored lights to be displayed along with the orchestral performance. Scriabin created a system of color-tone symbol associations for the symphony that would outline the tonality and convey philosophical symbols behind the music through illuminating colors. Colors were the basis of Scriabin's experiment with intersensory experience, which became a vital part of his artistic language and music philosophy. However, colors are seldom referenced in the study of his piano works. The purpose of the study is to explore ways to use color-tone-symbol associations established in *Prometheus* to aid in the interpretation process of his late poems using Scriabin's symbols and color metaphors.

The color analysis results in color-coded scores of *Poem* op. 59, no. 1, *Poem* op. 69, no.2, and *Vers la Flamme*, op. 72. The first chapter outlines the scope of the study. The second chapter provides background on the inspiration behind his color-tone-symbol associations. It also addresses how performers can relate to his associations through color metaphors. The third chapter offers a color analysis, interpretation, and performance suggestions for the

three poems. The fourth chapter encapsulates the findings from the analysis and the benefits of color analysis.

INDEX WORDS: Alexander Scriabin, piano poems, chromesthesia, symbolism, color metaphor, color-coding

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) was one of the first to explore ways of incorporating colors into a musical work. He, along with other artists experimenting with interdisciplinary ideas such as Richard Wagner (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), was inspired by chromesthesia, a neurological ability in which musical tones could be experienced in colors.<sup>1</sup> Chromesthesia, by a modern definition, is a physiological ability. However, the color-tone association was a new concept during Scriabin's time and did not have the scientific support as we have in the modern times; therefore, the term was most likely referred to the practice of relating one sensory experience to another.<sup>2</sup> Scriabin's chromesthesia with color was associative rather than physiological.<sup>3</sup> According to Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, Scriabin had three color-tone associations<sup>4</sup>: C-red, D-yellow, and F#-blue.<sup>5</sup> Scriabin then organized other pitches to fit the spectrum of colors in the order of the circle of fifths.<sup>6</sup> See Figure 1.1. Even though Scriabin's color-tone circle can seem contrived, what is interesting about it is how he used it. For Scriabin, the color-tone association had a particular purpose; it was a tool to communicate visions of his religious and philosophical beliefs. Colors carried meanings that he

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<sup>1</sup> Synesthesia refers to a general neurological phenomenon in which a stimulus of one sense triggers another sense. There are multiple types of synesthesia, but this research will focus on chromesthesia, the association of color and pitch.

<sup>2</sup> Anna M. Gawboy and Justin Townsend, "Scriabin and the Possible," *Music Theory Online* 18, no. 2 (June 2012). Accessed January 16, 2020,

[http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.2/mto.12.18.2.gawboy\\_townsend.php](http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.2/mto.12.18.2.gawboy_townsend.php).

<sup>3</sup> Physiological chromesthesia means that a chromesthete has an involuntary reaction of seeing color when they hear a pitch. Associative chromesthesia means that the act of matching color to tone is based on cultural and psychological meanings of color and tone.

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln Ballard, Matthew Bengtson, with John Bell Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 135.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that colors red, yellow, and blue are primary colors that evoke the strongest emotional response in color psychology. The specifics of this fact will be addressed in Chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

could use as a medium of expression. In other words, colors were an embodiment of a specific metaphor or a character.

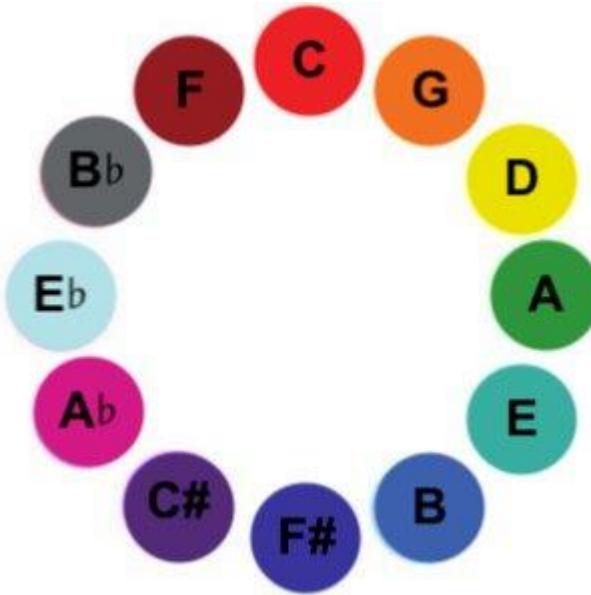


Figure 1.1. A depiction of Scriabin's color-tone associations arranged in a circle of fifths.<sup>7</sup>

Scriabin's color metaphors, which were inspired by the religious and philosophical teachings of his time, shared the color metaphors commonly known in the western culture.<sup>8</sup> For example, yellow is known to be a happy color because it is commonly associated with sunshine. Beethoven and Mozart used D major to symbolize joy and triumph, as did Scriabin.<sup>9</sup> Red is a warm color because it is the color of heat. Scriabin considered this an earthy color, eventually assigning it to represent 'man' in his first chromesthetic composition, *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*. Blue contained a mysterious quality therefore Scriabin labeled it to signify spiritual elements.

<sup>7</sup> This figure was created for this research according to Scriabin's color-tone associations used in *Prometheus*. Information on how Scriabin arranged the associations will be addressed in chapter 2 and 3.

<sup>8</sup> Scriabin incorporated Helena Blavatsky's color-tone associations of a diatonic scale (7 color-tone associations). Blavatsky was a philosopher and the founder of a religious movement called Theosophy. Most of her color metaphors used in her color-tone associations resemble the color metaphors commonly known in the western society. More information on this similarity will be discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 134.

*Prometheus*, a symphonic poem, was based on a Greek myth about a Titan stealing the “sacred fire of wisdom” from the gods to give to mortals. Eventually, humans become equal to gods.<sup>10</sup> Scriabin showed the struggle between the two symbols, “spiritual” (gods) and “material” (human), through the interplay of the tone-color C-red (human) and F<sup>#</sup>-blue (spiritual). The two tones, a tritone apart, are polar opposites on the circle of fifths. Scriabin used this tritone relationship to magnify the contrast between the two symbols. The two tones come to a union (Db-purple), and the symphony ends back in F<sup>#</sup>-blue, signifying human's equality with the gods through divine knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Scriabin wrote a separate part for a color-organ called *luce*<sup>12</sup> to show the interplay of colors in a performance.

### The Purpose of the Study

What Scriabin showed through *Prometheus* was that he could communicate the symbolism of the music through the progression of the color-tone metaphors. In an article about the performance project of *Prometheus*, Gawboy and Townsend explained that, "Color, often supported by lighting quality and dynamics, helps underscore long-range connections between specific moments in the work."<sup>13</sup> For chromesthetes and non-chromesthetes alike, color-tone association and color metaphors can be highly personal. Studies show that most chromesthetes do not share the same color-tone pairings.<sup>14</sup> However, the reason why Scriabin's colors are worth studying is that the color-tone-symbol relationship he established in *Prometheus* was an essential part of his philosophy, and he continued to develop it until his death in 1915. In his

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Scriabin, notes by Faubion Bowers, “Prometheus: Poem of Fire, Op. 60,” in *Poem of Ecstasy; and Prometheus: Poem of Fire* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 113.

<sup>11</sup> Gawboy and Townsend, “Scriabin and the Possible.”

<sup>12</sup> *Luce*, also known as *clavier à lumières*, was a 12-key electronic organ Scriabin had commissioned for the performance of *Prometheus*. Each key connected to a light bulb of a specific color to fill the concert hall with illuminating colors.

<sup>13</sup> Gawboy and Townsend, “Scriabin and the Possible.”

<sup>14</sup> Richard E. Cytowic, *Synesthesia: A Union of Senses* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 23-24, accessed January 4, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

book, Schloezer states that Scriabin considered multisensory art as "a function of his own artistic personality" and was continually working on perfecting its delivery through his compositions.<sup>15</sup> Scriabin used his piano works to refine his ideas for his symphonies, which is the reason why there is a need to study his piano works in the context of colors.

Though Scriabin did not systematically apply color to his piano compositions as he did in *Prometheus*, there is evidence that he thought about colored light in his piano works. Scriabin scholar Faubion Bowers explained that Scriabin was always exploring ways to reproduce optic light in his works.<sup>16</sup> In Piano Sonata, No. 2, Op. 19, Scriabin wanted to evoke moonlight and used a particular color-tone pairing to show this image. Bowers writes, "Scriabin transposes the main theme from G<sup>#</sup> minor to the brighter key of E major,"<sup>17</sup> which Scriabin saw as the color 'bluish pearl.' Scriabin's use of colors came not from chromesthetic convictions, but from his desire to create a vision that completed his music.

Chromesthesia has stayed relevant to this day because cross-modal perception and the use of metaphors are how humans naturally learn and process new information. In performance practice, musicians use visual metaphors to describe a specific texture, timbre, and touch. Musical passages can be described with words such as fluid, dark, or pixilated. The emotional content of music can also be described in color metaphors such as blue for pensiveness or green for serenity. Cytowic and Eagleman explain that "Cognition such as 'emotions, thoughts, and images' are experienced in sensual terms such as sound, taste, or touch."<sup>18</sup> For this reason, mindfulness of Scriabin's color-tone associations and its metaphors can enhance our understanding of his works and aid in creating a compelling performance interpretation.

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<sup>15</sup> Boris de Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic*, trans. Nicholas Slonimsky (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 91.

<sup>16</sup> Faubion Bowers, *Scriabin: A Biography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1996), 1:226.

<sup>17</sup> This quote refers to Scriabin's music written in the early part of his career. Toward the late period, Scriabin moved away from traditional harmonies by the time he wrote *Prometheus*, colors were applied to the root of a chord or the central note of a pitch set.

<sup>18</sup> Richard E. Cytowic and David M. Eagleman, *Wednesday is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 221, accessed January 20, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Scriabin's system of color-tone associations incorporated metaphorical colors based on the psychological and emotional content commonly associated with color and was an important part of his musical experience and artistic choices. The purpose of this study is to provide a color-coded score and discuss the possible metaphors of colors in Scriabin's three piano poems written around and after *Prometheus*, which will enable performers to interpret the psychological content behind each poem. Scriabin composed with specific images and emotions in mind<sup>19</sup>, and colors are an insightful way to describe such impressions without limiting the performer's creative output. The colors displayed directly on the score can cue helpful imagery to incorporate specific emotions into a performance.

The poems used for this research are *Poem Op. 59, No. 1*, *Poem Op. 69, No. 2*, and *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72. The reason piano poems are the subject of this research is that Scriabin favored the piano poem as a genre—it implied "an extra-musical content that sought to express a philosophical ideal."<sup>20</sup> The poems analyzed here are from the end of Scriabin's middle period to his late period, spanning from 1907-1915. The color analysis helps unpack the growing complexity of his compositional style during this period.

*Poem Op. 59, No. 1* was a poem written around the same time Scriabin wrote *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, and it resembles the harmonic language of the symphony. In this poem, Scriabin began to use the mystic chord, a central harmony in *Prometheus*, which played an essential role in conveying color metaphors in the symphony. *Poem Op. 69, No. 2* is the first poem derived from the octatonic scale, which Scriabin used to explore tritone relationships within the harmonic structure. The mystic chord, a sonority that continued to be an essential landmark, was adjusted to fit the octatonic scale. The use of the tritone relationship resembled the interplay of the C (red) and F<sup>#</sup> (blue) mystic chords in *Prometheus*, and color

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<sup>19</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 18.

analysis helps define the contrasting moods and trace their changes. *Vers la Flamme*, the last poem written by Scriabin and one of the most famous, has a clear musical direction described by Scriabin as "from the fog to the blinding light."<sup>21</sup> It possesses similar mystic overtones seen in *Prometheus*, such as the symbol of the eternal fire, which will be evident in the color-coded score in the next chapter.

### Literature Review

There are many academic studies on the theoretical and philosophical aspects of Scriabin's poems but research that uses color analysis in Scriabin's piano works is limited. The reason is that Scriabin used color labeling exclusively in his symphonic works, such as *Prometheus* and *Mysterium*, Scriabin's unfinished symphony. However, based on the fact that color-tone associations represented Scriabin's philosophy of music, elements of color should be considered in studying his piano works as well. The following documents were reviewed to obtain information for understanding Scriabin's harmonic language, his use of color in *Prometheus*, and the musical philosophy behind his piano compositions.

A master's thesis by Lana Forman, "The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin: An Analysis of the Three Études, op. 65," is currently the only research that tracks elements of color in Scriabin's piano works. Her thesis is a philosophical study with a focus on proving the presence of color in Scriabin's late piano works. Forman provides a symbolic interpretation of Scriabin's colors by examining the religious inspiration behind his color-tone associations. Forman's analysis of the three etudes op. 65 assigns colors by tracing the tritone link, which is a central idea behind Scriabin's philosophy. Forman's thesis will be used as a guide to understand the inspiration behind Scriabin's symbols for the purpose of providing a more performance-driven interpretation suggestion to performers.

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<sup>21</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 67.

A doctoral dissertation by Anna Gawboy, "Alexander Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue: Esotericism and the Analysis of *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* Op. 60," contains the most extensive research on the Scriabin color-tone association. Gawboy provides information on the inspiration behind the multisensory work, a breakdown of the harmonic language with analysis of piano works written around the same time as *Prometheus*, and the logic of Scriabin's color-coding in *Prometheus*, which will be essential to developing a color-coding method in this research. This dissertation also has several visual figures of the color-tone associations, which I will use to discern the way Scriabin applied color to music.

Elise Hae-Ryung Yun's doctoral dissertation, "Alexander Scriabin's Late Piano Poems: Language, Thought and Performance," gives a timeline analysis based on the movement of the bass, tonal centers, and melodic motives. It is the most theoretically thorough study of Scriabin's late piano poems, allowing performers to see the harmonic progression of the poems in one glance. Yun also focuses on analyzing the tritone relationship that frequently appears in Scriabin's late period.

Elise Hae-Ryung Yun used Varvara Dernova's method of analysis in her study, which accentuates important harmonic movements similar to those in *Prometheus*. Roy James Guenther's doctoral dissertation, "Varvara Dernova's *Garmonia Skriabina*: A Translation and Critical Commentary," gives access to Dernova's insight behind her analytical method. Her harmonic theory of Scriabin's music is the primary source for understanding the harmonic structure behind each poem.

*The Alexander Scriabin Companion* by Lincoln Ballard, Matthew Bengtson, and John Bell Young is a recently published book containing detailed information on Scriabin as a philosopher and a composer. The book gives an excellent overview of the composer's history, his body of work, and the inspiration behind his artworks. Their research also addresses the technical elements to consider in performance practice, and this information will be used as a reference in the interpretation step of my study.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was another composer who systematically applied color to his compositions. He was a chromesthete who physiologically saw colors in reaction to hearing tones. Though Messiaen and Scriabin did not experience colors in the same way, their method of applying color was similar. Jonathan W. Bernard has done extensive research on how Messiaen used color in his compositions, as seen in "Messiaen's Synesthesia: The Correspondence between Color and Sound Structure in His Music." He points out that Messiaen put color labels to chords or groups of sonorities, which was how Scriabin used a set of six pitches (the mystic chord) to color *Prometheus*. They both favored the octatonic scale<sup>22</sup> because of its invariant properties under transpositions.<sup>23</sup> Both composers were fascinated with mysticism and expressed symbolic images through their music. Because of the similarities in their musical language, my research uses Bernard's article as a reference to study and develop the mechanics of applying color to Scriabin's piano poems.

### Methodology

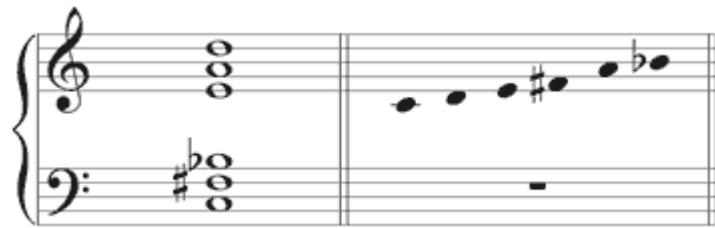
In *Prometheus*, the mystic chord was the basis of the harmonies and the melodies (Example 1.1 and Figure 1.2). The chord was based on the French augmented sixth chord, a sonority Scriabin favored. It also spelled a six-note subset of the Lydian-Dominant acoustic scale and shared 5 notes with each the whole tone and the octatonic scale, which Scriabin frequently used in his middle to late period. Scriabin created the color-tone system by superimposing twelve transpositions of the chord onto the color-tone associations arranged in a circle of fifths. Throughout the symphony, the *luce* illuminated colors by playing the root<sup>24</sup> of the harmony.

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<sup>22</sup> Scriabin favored the octatonic scale because of its ability to contain the mystic chord and its ability to produce more tritones than other scales, which was an important device Scriabin used in portraying the interplay of the spiritual and the material realms in his music.

<sup>23</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 272.

<sup>24</sup> The root is the lowest note of the mystic chord (Example 1.1). More detailed explanation of how the root is determined will be addressed in chapter 3.



Example 1.1. Scriabin's mystic chord.<sup>25</sup>

The reason why Scriabin favored this harmony was that he thought of the mystic chord as the musical symbol of his religious philosophy; to him, it symbolized the divine power that transcends the material world. It was a vital element of Scriabin's artistic mission, and the mystic chord served as a landmark even in works written after *Prometheus* because of what it symbolized. However, two problems occur when the analysis focuses solely on tracing the mystic chord in the late piano works. First, Scriabin's harmonic language grew more complex toward the end of his life. While the mystic chord was still a central part of his sound aesthetic, it became harder to identify due to the many variations of the chord. The variations made it harder to trace the harmonic progression and the mystic narrative Scriabin adopted from *Prometheus*. Second, as a symbol, the mystic chord, taken out of context does not help in realizing the full score of Scriabin's vision for each work.

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<sup>25</sup> Gawboy and Townsend, "Scriabin and the Possible."

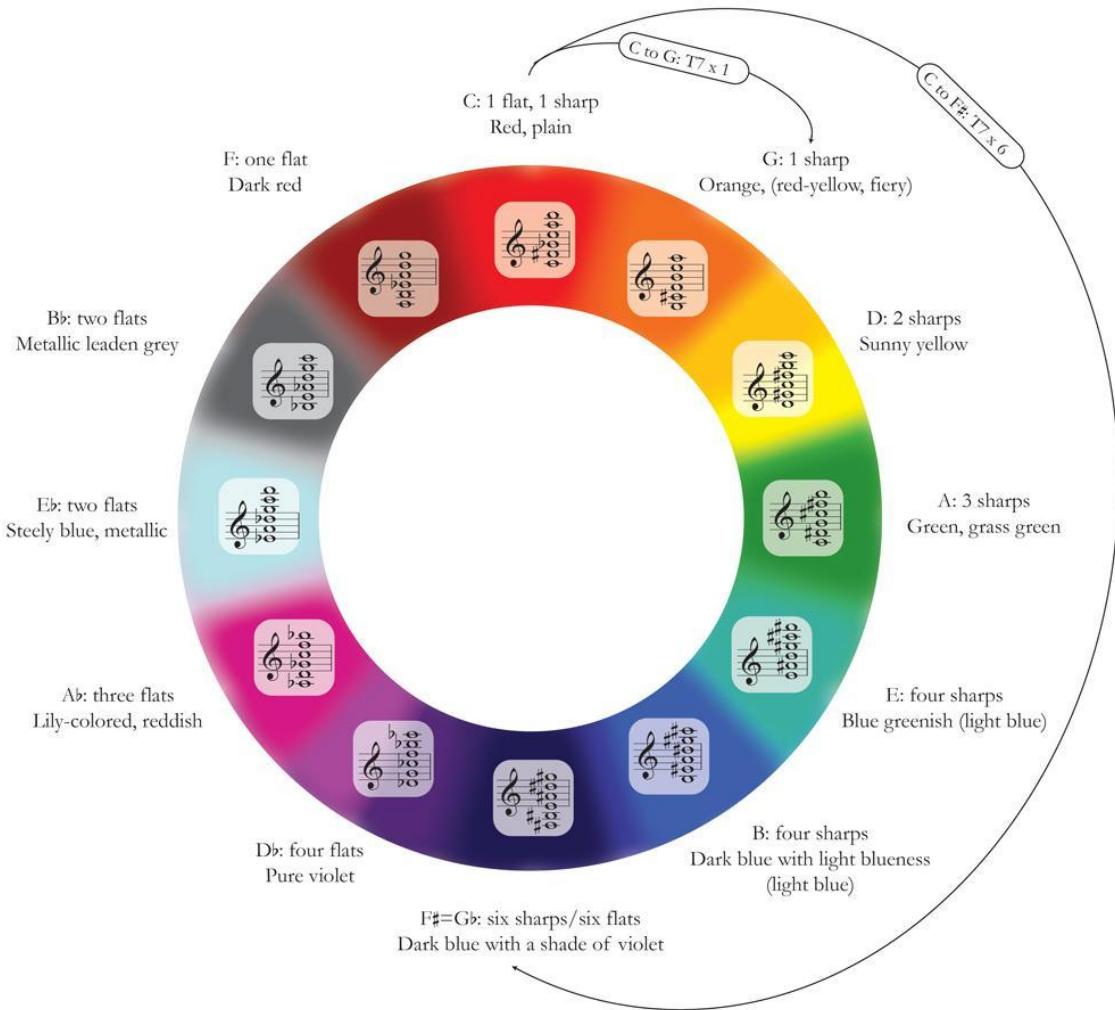


Figure 1.2. Anna Gawboy's color circle of the mystic chord.

Scriabin used the root of these chords to assign colors.<sup>26</sup>

Varvara Dernova, a Russian theorist, provides a method of analysis that helps address both these concerns. Dernova deciphers Scriabin's ever-changing harmonic language through the rearrangement of the mystic and variations of the mystic chord. According to Gawboy, Dernova's interpretation of Scriabin's late harmonies are "based on minimally-altered

<sup>26</sup> Gawboy and Townsend, "Scriabin and the Possible."

dominants.<sup>27</sup> Respelled harmonies can bring clarity to chords that, at times, seem out of place in Scriabin's music. An example Anna Gawboy uses to demonstrate this is Dernova's analysis of the final chord of *Enigma*, op. 52, no. 2. The key signature is D<sub>b</sub> major with an opening chord of A<sub>b</sub> dominant seventh with a flat fifth. The final chord of the piece in m. 61 (Example 1.2) is a combination of two augmented triads with the root of C, which does not have a significant function in the key of D<sub>b</sub> major. However, the opening chord, A<sub>b</sub> dominant, reappears in m. 57 leading up to the final chord. Dernova factors in the lingering bass from m. 57, interpreting the last harmony as an A<sub>b</sub> dominant chord and bringing a neat closure to the piano piece.<sup>28</sup> The rearrangement of ambiguous chords into a dominant chord structure<sup>29</sup> brings clarity in identifying the chord as seen in Example 1.3. The respelling also helps in establishing the root of each chord, which is essential in the color-coding.

Example 1.2. *Enigma*, op. 52, no. 2, mm. 56-62.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Gawboy, "Alexander Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue: Esotericism and the Analysis of *Prometheus: Poem of Fire Op. 60*" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2010), 150.

<sup>28</sup> Gawboy, "Theurgy in Blue," 150.

<sup>29</sup> Dominant chord structure refers to the chord structure instead of the harmonic function.

C and E<sub>flat</sub> augmented chords → A<sub>flat</sub> dominant chord

Example 1.3. The final chord of *Enigma* rearranged into a A<sub>flat</sub> dominant chord

Dernova's rearrangement of the chords adds to the interpretation of Scriabin's work by accentuating the presence of a tritone link between the two main sonorities in each composition. In *Prometheus*, Scriabin displayed the mystic message, the story of men becoming equal to the gods, by using the polarity of tone and color. This polarity can be seen in the interplay between C-red and F#-blue, equipping the observer with a way to follow the narrative of the symphony. Dernova's analyses focus on finding polarity in Scriabin's piano works with the use of the tritone link between two main sonorities. The tritone link of the two main sonorities will be treated as the focal element of the analysis of the three poems to create a similar context upon which Scriabin based his chromesthetic writing. The analysis will be focused on establishing the main tritone link first, then tracing the harmonic movement around the main tritone link.

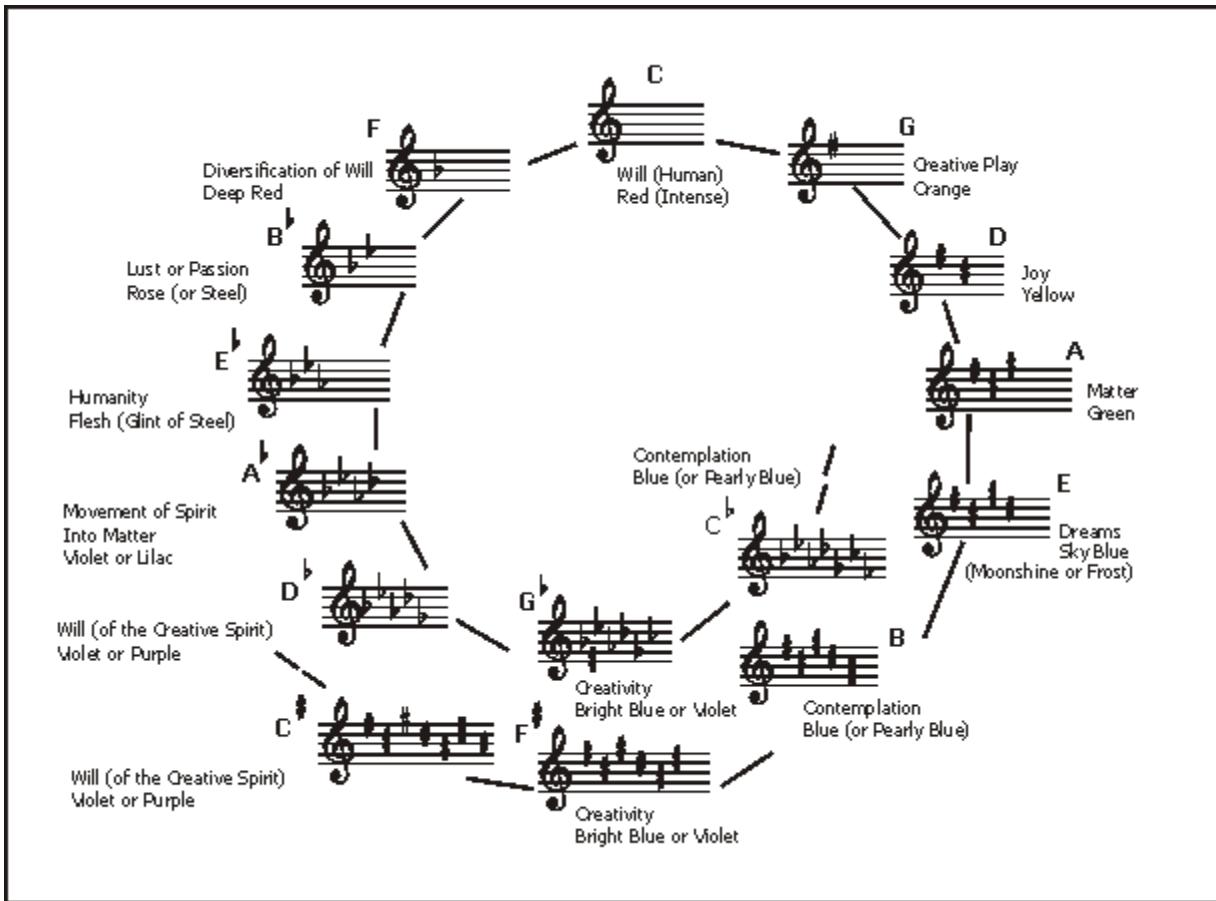


Figure 1.3. Galeev and Vanechkina's Musico-Chromo-Logo Schema.<sup>30</sup>

Following the analysis, the tritone link and secondary colors will be interpreted using the mystic symbols of "Scriabin's Musico-Chromo-Logo Schema" (Figure 1.3). It was created by Bulat Galeev and Irina Vanechkina, scientists and members of the color-music electronics laboratory, "Prometheus," in Kazan. Faubion Bowers, who received the schema from Galeev, states that the schema was put together by computerizing "everything Scriabin ever said about

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Scriabin, "Prometheus: Poem of Fire." *Poem of Ecstasy; and Prometheus: Poem of Fire.* Notes by Faubion Bowers. Reprint of the 1911 Edition Russe de Musique edition. (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 114.

the relation of music, meaning, and color, and reduced the synthesis to a circle of fifths.<sup>31</sup> Even though this scheme was not created by the composer himself, it gives an insight into Scriabin's color metaphor based on his comments. The key signature arrangement of the Galeyev and Vanechkina's schema poses problems in theoretical analysis because Scriabin did not write Prometheus using major keys.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, I will use Galeyev and Vanechkina's schema exclusively for the mystic symbols to interpret the colored analysis of the three poems and use Gawboy's color-tone scheme for the theoretical analysis and color-coding. color interpretation conducted for this research is based on personal opinion to create a more articulate performance and should not be regarded as the composer's view.

### Organization of the Document

The chapter organization of this study is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Color Symbolism and Benefit of Color Learning

Chapter 3: Color-coding of *Poems* Op. 59, No. 1; Op. 69, No. 2; and *Vers la Flamme* Op. 72

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The first chapter is an overview of the project; it includes a review of the relevant literature and a layout of the chart and methodology employed. The second chapter is a study of Scriabin's color metaphor and the benefits color-learning in relation to performance interpretation. The study will examine the following:

- The associative chromesthesia
- Scriabin's symbolism
- Colors as metaphors of symbols

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<sup>31</sup> Scriabin, "Prometheus: Poem of Fire," 114.

<sup>32</sup> Gawboy and Townsend, "Scriabin and the Possible."

- The benefit of developing mindfulness of color in music-making

The third chapter contains analyses of the three poems. It begins with background information on each piano poem, explaining any inspiration behind them and texts Scriabin provided on them. Then, the chapter offers the following for each poem:

- A theoretical analysis
- Color-coded score
- An interpretation of the poem
- Brief performance suggestions that show how particular colors should dictate pianistic elements.

The last chapter summarizes the findings and discusses the benefits of color analysis.

## CHAPTER 2

### COLOR SYMBOLISM AND THE BENEFIT OF COLOR-LEARNING

The purpose of this chapter is to show the importance of Scriabin's color-tone-symbol relationship. Any of the three elements taken out of context from each other is not as effective. Scriabin's symbols can be hard to understand and express in a performance. Unless the performer has studied the philosophies that influenced Scriabin's mystic elements, symbols remain an abstract concept that somehow have to be articulated in a performance. Color-tone pairings such as C-red and D-yellow in Scriabin's *Prometheus* can seem arbitrary without the context of Scriabin's mystic narrative. Colors, tones, and symbols work together, and this chapter provides basic information on Scriabin's mysticism, focusing on explaining how a performer can use the color metaphor to interpret Scriabin's mystic symbols.

#### Associative Chromesthesia

Richard E. Cytowic explains synesthesia like this: it is "a multidimensional spectrum in which the upper end prototypes are perceptual synesthesias such as colored hearing, phoneme tastes, and number forms. At the low end of the spectrum are conventional metaphors and perceptual similarities such as warm and cool colors. Occupying intermediate levels are experiences like goose bumps, empathic pain, imagery inspired by music or an aroma."<sup>33</sup> Physiological chromesthesia is an involuntary phenomenon in which color-tone association is paired and the chromesthete does not have any control over the pairing. Associative

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<sup>33</sup> Cytowic, *Synesthesia*, 19.

chromesthesia is a choice-based pairing. It means that the matches are based on a cultural or a personal understanding of metaphors. Associative chromesthesia can be cultivated by developing awareness of colors and their meanings.

During the late 19th century, the distinction between physiological and associative synesthesia had not been made. Chromesthesia meant the practice of relating color to tone, and it was a subject of fascination among artists during that time because of their desire to challenge the “traditional modes of perception.”<sup>34</sup> Musicians debated about the ultimate way to represent music in a visual form, and chromesthesia fit this need. Many artists thought color-tone associations should be standardized and tried to create a system of color-tone associations. An example of this stance is evident in the article “Harmonizing These Two Arts: Edmund Lind’s *The Music of Color*” by Jeremy Kargon. In this article, Kargon explains that the purpose behind the artists’ quest was to create a generalized color-tone association system for teaching. George Field, an English painter and a notable contributor to the color-tone theory in the 1840s-1850s, believed that colors “were arranged similar to music in a chromatic scale.”<sup>35</sup> Field believed that there was a hierarchy in colors, divided into primary, secondary, and tertiary. Blue, red, and yellow were part of the primary colors because they had the strongest presence. Field’s theory on color-tone connection reflects some of the beliefs shared among artists of their time.

Scriabin’s three color-tone pairings were also blue, red, and yellow. Scriabin matched the rest of the pairings around the three associations. These three primary colors are known to elicit a strong emotional response in non-synesthetes, further accentuating the associative nature of Scriabin’s pairings. Scriabin also attempted to standardize the color-tone

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<sup>34</sup> Jeremy Kargon, “Harmonizing These Two Arts: Edmund Lind’s *The Music of Color*,” *Journal of Design History* 24, no. 1 (December 2011): 1. Accessed January 20, 2020, <http://proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsbl&AN=RN299779516&site=eds-live>.

<sup>35</sup> Edmund Lind, *Diary of Edmund George Lind*, entry for Friday 21, 1848 (private collection). Quotes in Kargon’s, “Harmonizing These Two Arts,” 3.

correspondence. He created the color-tone circle for the purpose of it being used as a universal principle, so it was influenced by well-known color metaphors. Galeyev and Vanechkina state that "the composer did not want to believe that his associations were not compulsory for everyone."<sup>36</sup> Scriabin wanted the color-tone correspondences to be not a personal view, but a shared principle.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, he carefully curated the color-tone pairings so that they could be understood by many.

### Symbolism

Scriabin used the chromesthetic pairings to communicate a specific spiritual vision. Such an interdisciplinary idea came from his involvement in mystic symbolism. According to Richard Langham Smith, symbolism is a term used to describe "musical elements that may in some way be connected to extra-musical phenomena: the words of a poem, a natural object, or a person or emotional state."<sup>38</sup> Symbolism also refers to an artistic movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 19th-century Europe, composers favored musical symbolism for its programmatic elements.<sup>39</sup> They used motifs, timbre, and other musical elements to paint an image and to create a narrative. In the second half of the century, symbolism had taken a more philosophical approach led by a group of literary figures. They used "literary symbols with a plethora of meanings, rather than as specific signs."<sup>40</sup> In Russia, political unrest<sup>41</sup> had inspired the symbolists to assimilate religious elements into their philosophy.

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<sup>36</sup> Bulat M. Galeyev and Irina L. Vanechkina, "Was Scriabin a Synesthete?," *Leonardo* 34, no. 4 (January 2001): 358. Accessed January 16, 2020, [https://prometheus.kai.ru/skriab\\_e.htm](https://prometheus.kai.ru/skriab_e.htm).

<sup>37</sup> Lincoln Ballard, Matthew Bengtson, with John Bell Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 135.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Langham Smith, "Symbolism," in *The Oxford Companion to Music*: Oxford University Press, <https://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-6586>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> From the 1880s to 1917, Russia went through a violent political change resulting in the abolition of the Russian monarchy in 1917.

The idea of the mystic was at the center of Russian symbolism—philosophers and writers were attracted to the idea of divine knowledge. Vladimir S. Solovyov, who was one of the leading figures of Russian symbolism, wrote that the material world was “a synthesis of religion, philosophy, and science—of faith, thought, and experience.”<sup>42</sup> Solovyov believed that art was a powerful force that was “a microcosm of ‘total-unity’” and could be used to bring the material world into enlightenment.<sup>43</sup> He commissioned artists with a higher purpose, saying that the artist of the future generation will use their art to transfigure the material world into a spiritual state. This transfiguration was called the “ultimate mystery”<sup>44</sup> and became the goal of symbolists to create art that would induce this spiritual event.

In addition to Solovyov’s writings on symbolism, two other central figures who helped form Scriabin’s philosophy in the context of mystic symbolism were Vyacheslav I. Ivanov and Helena P. Blavatsky. Ivanov was a symbolist poet who encouraged Scriabin to explore intersensory art forms. Both interested in the mystic symbolism of Solovyov, he and Scriabin shared many conversations about the purpose of art and its role in the ultimate mystery.<sup>45</sup> They discussed how to create a structured system of multi-art for spiritual fellowship.<sup>46</sup> Through his conversations with Ivanov, Scriabin was able to articulate and materialize his ideas for *Prometheus*.

Helena P. Blavatsky was a philosopher and one of the founding members of the occult movement, Theosophy. Theosophy was about celebrating mystic powers and divine knowledge. Her writings on the duality of good and evil profoundly influenced Scriabin’s artistic style. Theosophy taught that good (spiritual/gods) and evil (material/human) must coexist for

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<sup>42</sup> Malcolm Brown, “Scriabin and Russian ‘Mystic’ Symbolism,” *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (July 1979): 44, in JSTOR, accessed February 15, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/3519821](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3519821).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 49.

"progress and evolution."<sup>47</sup> This polarity can be seen in the interplay of the two tones in *Prometheus* as well as in the late piano works. Blavatsky also influenced Scriabin's use of the mystic chord. She stated that sound had a supernatural power that could produce energy.<sup>48</sup> Scriabin wanted to explore this power of sound and theorized that the power would come not only from the "quantitative increase in the power of sound waves, but by a greater intricacy of sound combinations," as Boris de Schloezer writes.<sup>49</sup> This belief in the power of sound led Scriabin to create the mystic chord, and it explains the constant evolution of Scriabin's harmonic language to develop into increasingly more complex sound.

Mystic symbolism was the central inspiration behind Scriabin's intersensory ideas. Scriabin's history with symbolism also proves that his color-tone associations had meanings, and they were metaphors of his belief. His exploration of intersensory art did not stop with *Prometheus*. Scriabin planned on writing his final symphony, *Mysterium*, which would have colored lights, scents, and dancing to bring the world into the ultimate mystery. After *Prometheus*, Scriabin used his piano works to develop artistic and philosophical ideas for *Mysterium*. Schloezer explains that Scriabin's work "represented a series of gradual expansions systematically and logically evolving in the direction of a final ecstasy."<sup>50</sup> All of Scriabin's works follow the same progression of "languor, longing, impetuous striving, dance, ecstasy, and transfiguration."<sup>51</sup> Knowledge of the mystic narrative is essential to understanding not only *Prometheus* but also his piano works because they contain the same mystic narrative.

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<sup>47</sup> Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, vol. 2 (1888): 513, quoted in Anna Gawboy, "Alexander Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue: Esotericism and the Analysis of *Prometheus: Poem of Fire Op. 60*" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2010), 164.

<sup>48</sup> Gawboy, "Theurgy in Blue," 178.

<sup>49</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 241.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

### Colors as metaphors

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines metaphor as "something regarded as representative or suggestive of something else, esp. as a material emblem of an abstract quality, condition, notion, etc.; a symbol, a token."<sup>52</sup> A metaphor enables two seemingly unrelated elements, such as tone and color, to be unified under one meaning. Robert Cytowic and David Eagleman explain that we comprehend the concept of metaphors because it is a part of our natural cognitive process. Metaphor is a byproduct of "our physical interaction with a concrete, sensuous world."<sup>53</sup> We use the cross-sensory information to help us understand new information and put it into metaphoric phrases like "she has a cold heart." According to Cytowic and Eagleman, the progression of our cognitive process goes like this: "perception → synesthesia<sup>54</sup> → metaphor → language."<sup>55</sup>

In Scriabin's case, the color-tone associations are the metaphor for his mystic symbols. The progression of the cognitive process with his music would be labeled like this: perception (music) → synesthesia (tone to color) → metaphor (mystic symbol) → language (articulation into emotional content). The music is perceived with the color-tone associations that signify mystic symbols, which then is interpreted into emotional or psychological content. The last step, articulation, is possible because of the associative element in Scriabin's color-tone pairings. For example, Scriabin's color-tone associations were primarily based on the teachings of Theosophy. The Blavatsky and Besant's Theosophical correspondence table (Table 2.1) shows seven color-tone correspondences with seven different sides of man.<sup>56</sup> In Blavatsky's correspondence, red represents the animal instincts and passions of man. Yellow is "the Breath

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<sup>52</sup> "Metaphor," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. Oxford University Press, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www-oed-com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/view/Entry/117328?redirectedFrom=metaphor&>

<sup>53</sup> Cytowic and Eagleman, *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*, 166.

<sup>54</sup> Synesthesia, in this context, refers to the cross-sensory reaction everyone can experience (associative). In this research, synesthesia will be used for Scriabin's color-tone associations.

<sup>55</sup> Cytowic and Eagleman, *Wednesday is Indigo Blue*, 166.

<sup>56</sup> Gawboy, "Theurgy in Blue," 180.

of Life”<sup>57</sup> and “Giver of Life.”<sup>58</sup> Green is the color of the “animal soul,” a symbol of nature. Violet signifies “the Higher Mind,” which is the most spiritual aspect of man. Scriabin took Blavatsky’s color symbols and fitted them into twelve pitch classes arranged in a circle of fifths. During this process, the most spiritual symbol, B-violet, was moved to C#-violet. F# -blue became the new spiritual color because of its polarity from red, as shown in the polar positioning of the two tones in the circle of fifths.<sup>59</sup>

Upon scientific examination, psychologists have found that the colors of the spectrum are associated with certain moods. In general, colors are divided into two groups: red and colors close to red have “warm, active, and exciting qualities” and blue, violet, and green have “cool, passive, and calming qualities,” as Faber Birren writes.<sup>60</sup> Red was also commonly thought of as the “color of vigor, yellow the color of warmth and joy, green of abundance and health, blue of spirituality and thought.”<sup>61</sup> Table 2.2 shows the comparison of the color symbols of Blavatsky and Scriabin to color metaphors stated in Birren’s *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*. Scriabin’s symbols are from Galeyev and Vanechkina’s "Musico-Chromo-Logo Schema" based on Scriabin’s comments on music, meaning, and color. (See Chapter 1)

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<sup>57</sup> Lana Forman, “The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin: An Analysis of the Three Études, Op. 65” (Master’s thesis, York University, 2017), 100, accessed January 30, 2020, [https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/34286/Forman\\_Lana\\_2017\\_Masters.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=.](https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/34286/Forman_Lana_2017_Masters.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=)

<sup>58</sup> Gawboy, “Theurgy in Blue,” 197.

<sup>59</sup> Gawboy states that Scriabin’s goal was to bring out the contrast between spirit and matter with two mystic chords a tritone apart from each other. This led to his choice in electing F#-blue to be his spiritual symbol.

<sup>60</sup> Faber Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy: A Factual Study of the Influence of Color on Human Life* (San Francisco: Hauraki Publishing, 2016), 126, accessed January 30, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Table 2.1. Blavatsky/Besant Correspondence Table.

| NUMBERS                                                                                                                                        | METALS                                                                                                                | PLANETS                                                                                                                                                                              | THE HUMAN PRINCIPLES                                                             | DAYS OF THE WEEK                                                                                                                 | COLOURS                   | SOUND MUSICAL SCALE |               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------|
|                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                  |                           | Saukrat<br>Gamm     | Italian Gamut |
| 1 AND 10<br>Physical Man's Key-note                                                                                                            | IRON.                                                                                                                 | MARS.<br>The Planet of Generation.                                                                                                                                                   | KĀMA RUPA.<br>The vehicle or seat<br>of the Animal<br>Instincts and<br>Passions. | TUESDAY.<br><i>Dies Martis</i> , or Tim.                                                                                         | 1. RED                    | SA.                 | DO.           |
|                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                  |                           |                     |               |
| 2<br>Life Spiritual and Life Physical.                                                                                                         | GOLD.                                                                                                                 | THE SUN.<br>The Giver of Life physically,<br>Spiritually, and Esoterically<br>the substitute for the inter-<br>Mercurial Planet, a sacred<br>and secret planet with the<br>ancients. | PRĀNA OR JIVA.<br>Life                                                           | SUNDAY.<br><i>Dies Solis</i> , or Sun                                                                                            | 2. ORANGE                 | RI.                 | RE.           |
| 3<br>Because BUDDHI is (so to speak)<br>between ĀTĀLĀ and MANĀS, and<br>forms with the seventh, or<br>AURIC ENVELOPE, the<br>DEVACHANIC TRIAD. | MERCURY.<br>Mixes with Sulphur, as<br>BUDDHI is mixed with<br>the Flame of Spirit (See<br>Alchemical<br>Definitions.) | MERCURY.<br>The Messenger and the<br>Interpreter of the Gods.                                                                                                                        | BUDDHI.<br>Spiritual Soul, or<br>Ātmic Ray, vehicle<br>of Ātma.                  | WEDNESDAY.<br><i>Dies Mercurii</i> , or Wooden<br>Day of Buddha in the<br>South, and of Woden in<br>the North—Gods of<br>Wisdom. | 3. YELLOW                 | GA.                 | MI.           |
| 4<br>The middle principle—between<br>the purely material and the<br>purely spiritual triads. The<br>conscious part of animal man.              | LEAD.                                                                                                                 | SATURN.                                                                                                                                                                              | KĀMA MANAS.<br>The Lower Mind, or<br>Animal Soul                                 | SATURDAY<br><i>Dies Saturni</i> , or Saturn.                                                                                     | 4. GREEN                  | MA.                 | FA.           |
| 5                                                                                                                                              | TIN.                                                                                                                  | JUPITER.                                                                                                                                                                             | AURIC ENVELOPE.                                                                  | THURSDAY.<br><i>Dies Iovis</i> , or Thor                                                                                         | 5. BLUE                   | PA.                 | SOL.          |
| 6                                                                                                                                              | COPPER.                                                                                                               | VENUS.                                                                                                                                                                               | MANAS<br>The Higher Mind, or<br>Human Soul                                       | FRIDAY.<br><i>Dies Veneris</i> , or Frige                                                                                        | 6. INDIGO OR<br>DARK BLUE | DA.                 | LA.           |
| 7<br>Contains in itself the reflection<br>of Septenary Man.                                                                                    | SILVER.                                                                                                               | THE MOON.<br>The Parent of the Earth.                                                                                                                                                | LINGA SHARIKA.<br>The Astral Double<br>of Man; the Parent<br>of the Physical Man | MONDAY.<br><i>Dies Lunae</i> , or Moon.                                                                                          | 7. VIOLET                 | NI.                 | SI.           |

Table 2.2. Color symbols of Blavatsky and Scriabin in comparison to color metaphors.

|        | Blavatsky                                  | Scriabin                    | Color Psychology         |
|--------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Red    | Animal instincts and passions              | Will of Human               | Vigor                    |
| Yellow | Breath of life, Giver of life              | Joy                         | Warmth and Joy           |
| Green  | Animal soul, Nature                        | Matter (Earthly Matter)     | Abundance and Health     |
| Blue   | The Higher Mind, Human Soul<br>(spiritual) | Creativity (most spiritual) | Spirituality and Thought |

In this table, we see that these abstract symbols have a strong connection to color metaphors that humans have developed biologically and psychologically.<sup>62</sup> Symbols such as “animal soul” and “matter” are labeled green because they elicit the color of vegetation in nature. “Giver of life” and “joy” are yellow because they are reminiscent of the warmness of the sun. The mystic symbols of Blavatsky and Scriabin are hard to grasp. However, with the help of color metaphors, we can articulate the psychological and emotional content to convey them in a performance.

#### The benefit of color-learning

Color can elicit a mental reaction, such as joy or anger. It can be a practical tool to internalize Scriabin’s mystic symbols quicker because of our natural response to colors. The chromesthetic elements give the emotional content without the necessity for a detailed analysis

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<sup>62</sup> As explained by Birren, a biological and psychological understanding of color refers to our sensuous experience of the outside world such as sunlight, cold, and warmth, and so on.

of the mystic symbols. Jose Valentio Ruiz-Resto explains why the color-tone-symbols work well together through Charles Pierce's study of signs and meaning:

We learn through three types of signs for communication in all aspects of our lives.... These three signs are iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Iconic signs insinuate meaning by way of resemblance. For instance, in notated music composers might indicate the performer to bang on the low register of a piano to mimic the sound of thunder. Indexical signs communicate meaning through conceptual representation. For example, many composers write programmatic music – music that represents a mood, a scene, an emotion, a storyline, and so forth. Contrary to the previous two, symbolic signs have no relation to mental imagery because they are a form of external visual imagery.<sup>63</sup>

Ruiz-Resto continues to explain that the symbolic sign in the context of music is an element that represents something more profound than a mood or a scene. It is the composer's purpose behind his music—a belief, a doctrine. In Scriabin's case, his symbolic sign would be the mystic symbols. Iconic signs are performance notes from the composer such as "Avec grâce et douceur" (with grace and sweetness) in Op. 5, no. 1, or "Lumineux" (luminous) in *Vers la Flamme*. The indexical signs would be the psychological content, and the mystic narrative shared in all of Scriabin's works, as stated by Schloezer. All three signs are essential in forming a clear musical direction. Color-learning benefits an understanding of Scriabin's piano poems because it equips the performer with tools to connect to his music more intimately. Our understanding of color offers a way to interpret the composer's mystic symbols.

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<sup>63</sup> Jose Valentio Ruiz-Resto, "The Effects of Technical and Imagery-based Instruction on Aspiring Performing Artists' Acquisition of Learning Newly Composed Pieces and Improvisation and on Listeners' Perceived Expressivity" (DPM diss., University of South Florida, 2016), 38.

## CHAPTER 3

### COLOR-CODING OF Poems Op. 59, no. 1; Op. 69, no. 2; and Vers la Flamme, Op. 72

Scriabin showed that colors communicated the mystic symbolism through the color-tone metaphors in *Prometheus*. He did this by labeling the root of each of the 12 transpositions of the mystic chord with color then displaying the colors throughout the moving tonalities with a color-organ. In addition to communicating the mystic content, the purpose of Scriabin's colors was to outline the tonality.<sup>64</sup> Scriabin stated that "(color) makes the tonality more evident."<sup>65</sup> In his attempt to create a work that could lead the audience into a spiritual experience, Scriabin used colors and their metaphors to trace the tonality and the mystic narrative in *Prometheus*. The premiere of the symphonic poem was not successful partially due to the technical difficulty of fully presenting the colors effectively.<sup>66</sup> The other criticism of the light symphony was whether the lights could communicate the composer's mystic narrative. Without the knowledge of Scriabin's philosophy, the audience had a hard time understanding the effects or the purpose of the lights. A performer, however, is in a unique position to see what colors can communicate through the study of the musical score.

Scriabin remarked that he saw his music in images, and his job was to "render this inner image into sounds, without distortion."<sup>67</sup> This process can be seen in two ways. The first is in visually descriptive performance directions from the composer such as "éclatant, lumineux"

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<sup>64</sup> Tonality refers to the arrangement of pitches. Scriabin used versions of the mystic chord as a pitch set on which he based harmonic and melodic content. Therefore, the word "tonality" refers to the overall harmonic makeup of Scriabin's music, including the mystic or variations of the mystic chord in this document.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Myers, "Two Cases of Synesthesia," *British Journal of Psychology* 7 (1914-1915), 113.

<sup>66</sup> The original *luce* used colored light bulbs, which was not effective in projecting the colors to the audience in the premiere of the symphony.

<sup>67</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 85.

(bursting with light) or a programmatic title such as *Vers la Flamme (Toward the Flame)*. The second is in the pattern of polarity in his music. As mentioned in previous chapters, the struggle and the unification of the two powers, material and spiritual, is the premise of all Scriabin's compositions.<sup>68</sup> The way Scriabin set the color-tone circle makes it easy to see the contrast between two tones a tritone apart.

Color-coding the poems provides a way to see the pattern of polarity clearer without a detailed analysis. A theoretical analysis is important in identifying the deeper connections of the harmonies and leads to a better understanding of the details of Scriabin's vision for the music. However, the purpose of the color-coded score is to give the performer an engaging way to grasp the emotional content of the music with the help of Scriabin's color-tone associations, mystic symbols, and color metaphors. Upon seeing the colors, performers can form an interpretation of the color-symbol provided, so that they can establish a clear musical direction. They also aid performers in practice because colors efficiently cue them to produce the appropriate tone associated with their color metaphor. This chapter will provide suggestions on how to use awareness of colors for effective performance. The application and the interpretations of colors are based on my experience with Scriabin's color; however, the color-coding of this dissertation does not necessarily reflect the methods of the composer.<sup>69</sup>

### The Twelve Colors

Multiple sources provide Scriabin's color-tone system, but there are some discrepancies. Table 3.1 shows Lana Forman's table comparing Scriabin's color-tone associations in Leonid

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<sup>68</sup> Schloezer, *Scriabin*, 97.

<sup>69</sup> Scriabin did not explicitly apply colors in the music, but Schloezer states that the composer saw images in specific colors, which then he transferred into the compositions.

Sabaneev's<sup>70</sup> memoir, the Parisian score manuscript, and Vanechchina-Galeev's Music-Chromo-Logo Schema.

Table 3.1. Forman's comparison of Scriabin's color-tone associations.<sup>71</sup>

| Tonalities           | Sabaneev<br>1911                 | Scriabin<br>Parisian Score<br>1913            | Vanechkina/Galeev<br>“Musico-Chromo-<br>Logo” Schemata<br>1975 |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| C major              | Red                              | Plain red                                     | Will (Human)<br><i>Red (Intense)</i>                           |
| G major              | Orange-pink                      | Orange (red-yellow),<br>fiery                 | Creative Play<br><i>Orange</i>                                 |
| D major              | Yellow                           | Sunny yellow                                  | Joy<br><i>Yellow</i>                                           |
| A major              | Green                            | Grass green                                   | Matter<br><i>Green</i>                                         |
| E major              | Glittering dark blue             | Dark blue-greenish<br>(light blue)            | Dreams<br><i>Sky Blue</i><br>( <i>Moonshine or Frost</i> )     |
| B major              | Similar to E major               | Dark blue with light<br>blueness (light blue) | Contemplation<br><i>Blue (or Pearly Blue)</i>                  |
| F-sharp/G-flat major | Dark blue, bright                | Deep dark blue with a<br>shade of violet      | Creativity<br><i>Bright Blue or Violet</i>                     |
| C-sharp/D-flat major | Violet                           | Pure violet                                   | Will (of the Creative<br>Spirit)<br><i>Violet or Purple</i>    |
| A-flat major         | Magenta-violet                   | Lily coloured<br>(reddish)                    | Movement of Spirit<br>into Matter<br><i>Violet or Lilac</i>    |
| E-flat major         | Steely,<br>With a metallic shine | Steely blue, metallic                         | Humanity<br><i>Flesh (Glint of Steel)</i>                      |
| B-flat major         | Similar to E-flat major          | Metallic leaden grey                          | Lust or Passion<br><i>Rose (or Steel)</i>                      |
| F major              | Dark red                         | Dark red                                      | Diversification of Will<br><i>Deep Red</i>                     |

<sup>70</sup> Leonid Sabaneev was a music critic and Scriabin's friend. He dedicated much of his life writing about Scriabin's life and his music.

<sup>71</sup> Forman, “The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin,” 95.

The most notable color differences are Eb and Bb— Sabaneev and the Parisian score list these tones as metallic colors, whereas Galeyev and Vanechkina list flesh and rose as the main colors of the two pitches.<sup>72</sup> Forman explains that Scriabin differentiated enharmonic pitches with colors. Scriabin stated that “Flat keys have some sort of metallic sheen, while sharp keys are bright, saturated with color and without any of the metallic hue.”<sup>73</sup> However, the actual colors used in *Prometheus* as seen in the Sabaneev and the Parisian versions of the associations, do not differentiate between enharmonic pitches. Therefore, the color-coding of the poems will follow the associations provided in Scriabin’s Parisian score.

The color-tone correspondence of the Sabaneev and the Parisian score of *Prometheus* reflects Scriabin’s chromesthetic opinion around the time he wrote the symphony. Galeyev and Vanechkina’s colors seem to be based on the Parisian score as well as on Scriabin’s interview with Myers in 1914. Myers wrote:

The stronger colours for Scriabin appear to be those relating to the keys of C major, D major, B major and F# major, placed respectively in the red, orange, yellow, blue and violet. Starting, however, from C at the red end of the spectrum, Scriabin finds that as he passes from hue to hue, the successive colours correspond to tonalities rising by a series of fifths. Thus the key of C is red, of G red to orange-red, of D orange to yellow, of A yellow to green, of E green to blue, of B blue to violet, and of F# violet. The colours of the remaining keys Db, Ab, Eb, Bb and F are believed by Scriabin to be extra-spectral, - either ultra-violet or infra-red. Thus the key of F is “on the verge of red,” giving the effect of metallic lustre.<sup>74</sup>

According to Scriabin in 1914, Eb and Bb have a red hue, which explains the colors listed in the Galeyev-Vanechkina circle. Gawboy states that the reason why there is inconsistency in the colors is due to Scriabin drawing from multiple sources in an attempt to make his associations universal.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Galeyev and Vanechkina still list the metallic colors under Eb and Bb, but they are in parenthesis, meaning that the main colors are shades of red.

<sup>73</sup> Scriabin in Leonid Sabaneev, *Vospominaniya* quoted in Forman, “The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin,” 95.

<sup>74</sup> Myers, “Two Cases of Synesthesia,” 114.

<sup>75</sup> Gawboy, “Alexander Scriabin’s Theurgy in Blue,” 200.

The comparison of the three sources in the Table 3.1 above and Myer's colors shows that Scriabin's color-tone pairings were a work in progress. The colors of the strong color-tone associations (C, D, F $\sharp$ ) have not changed, but the colors of other tones (D $\flat$ , A $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , and F) were not always consistent. The limited sources on the actual shade of the color presented a challenge to set Scriabin's color scheme. The most significant source we currently have of the visual representation of Scriabin's colors is Gawboy's color wheel based on the composer's description of colors in the Parisian score.<sup>76</sup> These are the colors that Scriabin used to actualize his color-tone associations into a performance of *Prometheus*. For this reason, my color-coding analysis uses the pairings provided in Gawboy's dissertation as seen in Figure 3.1 and Galeyev-Vanechkina (1975) as a reference for the mystic symbols.

#### Method of Analysis and Color-Coding

As crucial as the mystic chord was to Scriabin's sound aesthetic, it has evolved along with Scriabin's harmonic language. Jay Reise stated that the mystic chord "is neither the key nor the generating element in Skriabin's method. That it appears often and is among Skriabin's favorite sonorities is undeniable, but many other similar chords are also present."<sup>77</sup> In *Prometheus*, Scriabin labeled harmonies with color by the root note of mystic chords. The most well-known spelling of the mystic chord was in quartal spacing due to Sabaneev's claim that Scriabin created the chord from the acoustic scale.<sup>78</sup> However, Gawboy pointed out that Scriabin sketched the mystic chord in both fourths and thirds. Varvara Dernova used stacked thirds to analyze the mystic and versions of the mystic chords to make it easy to organize Scriabin's evolving harmonies as seen in Example 3.1.

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<sup>76</sup> Gawboy, "Alexander Scriabin's Theurgy in Blue," 192.

<sup>77</sup> Jay Reise, "Late Skriabin: Some Principles behind the Style," *19th-Century Music* 6, no. 3 (Spring, 1983): 221.

<sup>78</sup> Sabaneev, *Vospominaniya* quoted in Forman, "The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin," 9.

C mystic chord in stacked fourths      C mystic chord in stacked thirds

Example 3.1. The mystic chord in stacked fourths and stacked thirds.<sup>79</sup>

Dernova changes the spelling of one of the pitches as seen in Example 3.1 to rearrange the mystic chord into a dominant chord.<sup>80</sup> The reason for organizing it in a dominant structure is to provide an efficient way to find the root of each chord.<sup>81</sup> The rearrangement of Scriabin's harmonies into a dominant structure does not change the root of the chord, and it allows us to color-code by the root of each harmony as Scriabin did in *Prometheus*. My analysis will focus on tracing the root of the harmonies in Scriabin's poems using Dernova's dominant-based method of analysis. Then the root will be labeled with color using the color-tone associations in Table 3.2.

<sup>79</sup> Dernova uses an enharmonic spelling (F<sup>#</sup> to G<sub>b</sub>) to change into a stacked third structure.

<sup>80</sup> In this research, the dominant chord refers to the structure of the chord, not the harmonic function. All sonorities of the poems can be arranged in a dominant chord type of structure and will follow Dernova's referral to them as dominant chords.

<sup>81</sup> The term, root, is used here in a traditional sense that it is the central note of each harmony, which includes the mystic and variations of the mystic chord.

Table 3.2. Color-tone associations used for color-coding.

| Tone                            | Op. 59 & 69 | G & V's mystic symbols         |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| C                               | Red         | Will (Human)                   |
| G                               | Orange      | Creative Play                  |
| D                               | Yellow      | Joy                            |
| A                               | Green       | Matter                         |
| E                               | Cyan        | Dreams                         |
| C <sub>b</sub> / B              | Blue        | Contemplation                  |
| G <sub>b</sub> / F <sup>#</sup> | Dark Blue   | Creativity                     |
| D <sub>b</sub> / C <sup>#</sup> | Purple      | Will (of the Creative Spirit)  |
| A <sub>b</sub>                  | Magenta     | Movement of Spirit into Matter |
| E <sub>b</sub>                  | Light Cyan  | Humanity                       |
| B <sub>b</sub>                  | Grey        | Lust or Passion                |
| F                               | Dark Red    | Diversification of Will        |

The importance of polarity in Scriabin's philosophy was reflected in the presence of tritonal relationships in his late compositions. The "tritone link," as Dernova called it, is how Scriabin showed the polarity of the spiritual and material elements. In the late period, Scriabin

created such polarity in his music by using the main dominant chord called Dominant A (DA) and another dominant chord a tritone lower called Dominant B (DB)<sup>82</sup> as the central idea behind each composition. The interplay of the tritonal relationship created the mystic narrative. For this reason, the color analysis will focus on tracing the main tritone link in each poem.

The main tritone link is in the first few measures of each poem with B chord (DA) and F chord (DB). Through the course of the poem, the tonality ventures away and comes back to the main tritone link with the two dominants flipped in order (DB-DA) at the end of the poem. The main tritone link behaves similarly to a tonic in the traditional harmonic function—it functions as a home base. Each poem begins with the main tritone and ends with the main tritone link. Even though the main tritone link serves as the central narrative, other tritone links can be present in the same composition. These tritone links are transpositions of the main tritones and they provide a sense of harmonic movement throughout the composition.<sup>83</sup> Yun explains that Dernova has found that Scriabin frequently created sequential chord progressions<sup>84</sup> through transpositions of the main tritone link.<sup>85</sup> Because the transposed tritone links create harmonic movement in the poems, all links will be labeled with color. Each tritone will be given a name: the main tritone link will be abbreviated to MT and the transposed tritones will be TT. TTs will be numbered TT1 and TT2 if there are multiple transposed tritone links.

Upon establishing the tritone links, a separate color scheme will show the outline of the poem organized in a way that a performer can easily see the pattern of the changing tonalities. Then transparent colors are applied directly onto each measure of the poem so that the

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<sup>82</sup> Dominant A (DA) refers to the main dominant chord of the composition, which is also always the first chord of the composition. Dominant B (DB) always directly follows DA. According to Hae-Ryung Yun, DB is generally enharmonically related to DA, but this is not always the case as seen in the main tritone link B(DA)-F(DB) of *Poem* op. 59, no. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Elise Hae-Ryung Yun, "Alexander Scriabin's Late Piano Poems: Language, Thought and Performance" (PhD diss., New York University, 1998), 40.

<sup>84</sup> Yun stated that Dernova's analysis found sequences created by transpositions of the main tritone link. Most often, these sequences are in whole steps. But as seen in the distance between all DA chords in *Poem* op. 59, no. 1 on p. 34, there are instances when Scriabin chose to create sequence in half-steps.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

performers are experiencing the color-tone relationship as they play. The MT will have colors covering the full measure and TT1, TT2 will be labeled with a thin colored line. The difference between the TTs will be evident in the width of the line in both the color scheme chart and the colored score. My interpretation of the transposed tritones is that each plays different roles. In *Poem* op. 59, no. 1, TT's proximity to the MT determines the numbers. In Example 3.2, TT1 (F<sup>#</sup>-C) appears after TT2 (C<sup>#</sup>-G) in the opening measures of the poem. However, because F<sup>#</sup>-C is a half-step transposition from MT (B-F), F<sup>#</sup>-C is labeled as TT1. The width of the colored lines is determined using the same method. Because of TT1's close proximity to MT, TT1 plays a more significant role than the other transposed tritones— TT1 is used in important musical landmarks such as the first statement of theme 2. Therefore, the TT1 is given a thicker line than TT2 and TT3.

2 PIÈCES  
(1910)  
Poème

Op. 59 Nr. 1

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>MT:</b><br><span style="background-color: blue; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px 5px;">B</span> Contemplation<br><span style="background-color: red; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px 5px;">F</span> Diversification of Will | <b>TT2:</b><br><span style="background-color: orange; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px 5px;">G</span> Creative Play      65<br><span style="background-color: purple; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px 5px;">C#</span> Will (of the Creative Spirit) | <b>TT3:</b><br><span style="background-color: pink; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px 5px;">Ab</span> Movement of Spirit into Matter<br><span style="background-color: yellow; border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px 5px;">D</span> Joy |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Example 3.2. A color-coded excerpt of Scriabin's *Poem* Op. 59, no. 1

outlining the MT, TT1, and TT2.

The interpretation of the poem will address how a performer can take the emotional and psychological content of the tritones and translate them into a performance. The first step of interpretation will consist of noting the performance directions written in the score by the composer. Then the directions will be cross-examined with the meaning of each color in the MT and TTs using the Galeyev-Vanechkina circle and color metaphors. After forming a mental image of the poem, the final step of the interpretation will provide performance suggestions on how to use touch, dynamics, tempo, and phrasing to create an appropriate aesthetic.

#### Poem Op. 59, no. 1 (1910)

*Poem* op. 59, no. 1 was written at the same time as *Prometheus* and was finished before the symphonic poem. It is the first of Scriabin's works to be written without a key signature, signaling a change in his harmonic language.<sup>86</sup> The poem is based on the whole-tone scale, which enabled Scriabin to explore tritonal relationships. Influenced by *Prometheus*, the poem contains many elements of the mystic chord. The chord's effect on the overall sound of the poem is interesting because the mystic chord does not contain major or minor triads embedded as subsets of the chord. The absence of the tonal quality along with the tritonic movements of the bass give an atmospheric and dreamy aesthetic.

The structure of the poem is AAB(A). The last A section is not in a full statement, but it plays an essential role in bringing the tonality back to the MT. What is unique about the B section is its lack of a contrasting melody. Scriabin uses a theme based on the second theme introduced in the A section instead of a new melody. David Rodriguez De La Peña calls the poem a monothematic poem because there is no contrasting material. "Every section is derived motivically, rhythmically, and texturally from the opening material."<sup>87</sup> The unity of the

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<sup>86</sup> David Rodríguez De La Peña, "Development of Formal Structure in the Piano Poems of Alexander Scriabin," (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, 1997), 68.

<sup>87</sup> Peña, "Development of Formal Structure in the Piano Poems of Alexander Scriabin," 115.

monothematic form gives a sense of fluidity, despite the unusual phrase lengths. The A sections mm. 1-12 and mm. 13-18 consist of 6-measure phrases. The B section has two 8-measure phrases, which can be traced with the thematic play and the root note pattern.

Because of the whole tone element of the poem, most of the variants of the mystic chords have changed to V<sup>9</sup> chords with a raised fifth and an added sixth, as shown in Example 3.3. A raised fifth is consistent with the whole tone scale, but the sixth is a half-step lower than how it should be on a whole tone scale. It results in a more dissonant sound, which is frequently paired with the color red. The B chord in the opening measure is a part of the MT, B and F, and its chord structure alludes to the mystic chord by omitting the raised fifth note, which can be seen in the comparison of the B chord and the mystic chord in Example 3.4. All that is missing from the B chord is a lowered fifth to complete a mystic chord.

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of common time. It features a chord consisting of a root note (F#), a third (A), and a fifth (C#). The second staff contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (G#), and a time signature of common time. It features a chord consisting of a root note (G#), a third (B), and a fifth (D#).

F chord in m. 2                                    G chord in m. 4

Example 3.3. The altered mystic chords of *Poem Op. 59, No. 1*.

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff contains a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a time signature of common time. It features a chord consisting of a root note (F#), a third (A), and a fifth (C#). The second staff contains a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (G# and B#), and a time signature of common time. It features a chord consisting of a root note (G#), a third (B), and a fifth (D#).

B chord in m. 1                                    B mystic chord

Example 3.4. Chord comparison of the B chord to the mystic chord.

The colors of the MT and TTs accentuate the polarity with red and blue hues, and the two colors should be the focus in the interpretive stage. The color chart in Table 3.3 shows the power struggle between material F and spiritual B throughout the poem. The piece begins with sky blue of B with the composer's remark "Avec grâce et douceur" ("with grace and sweetness"). There is a glimpse of the dark red at the beginning, but the blues dominate the A section of the poem. The second half of the poem is where we begin to see the shift to the reds. They linger longer toward the end, as seen in mm. 25-26 and 37-39, but ultimately come back to the sky blue in the last measure of the poem.

*Table 3.3. The colors and their symbols in Poem Op. 59, no. 1.*

| Tritone Link | Tone                | Colors   | G & V's meaning                |
|--------------|---------------------|----------|--------------------------------|
| MT           | B (DA)              | Blue     | Contemplation                  |
|              | F (DB)              | Dark Red | Diversification of Will        |
| TT1          | C (DA)              | Red      | Will (Human)                   |
|              | F# (DB)             | Blue     | Creativity                     |
| TT2          | G (DA)              | Orange   | Creative Play                  |
|              | C# (DB)             | Purple   | Will (of the Creative Spirit)  |
| TT3          | A <sub>b</sub> (DA) | Magenta  | Movement of Spirit into Matter |
|              | D (DB)              | Yellow   | Joy                            |

The functions of the tritones in this poem show that traditional rules of composition still influenced Scriabin during this time. Each tritone resembles the behavior of tonic, dominant, and subdominant. The MT(B-F) behaves like the home base, beginning and ending the poem. The

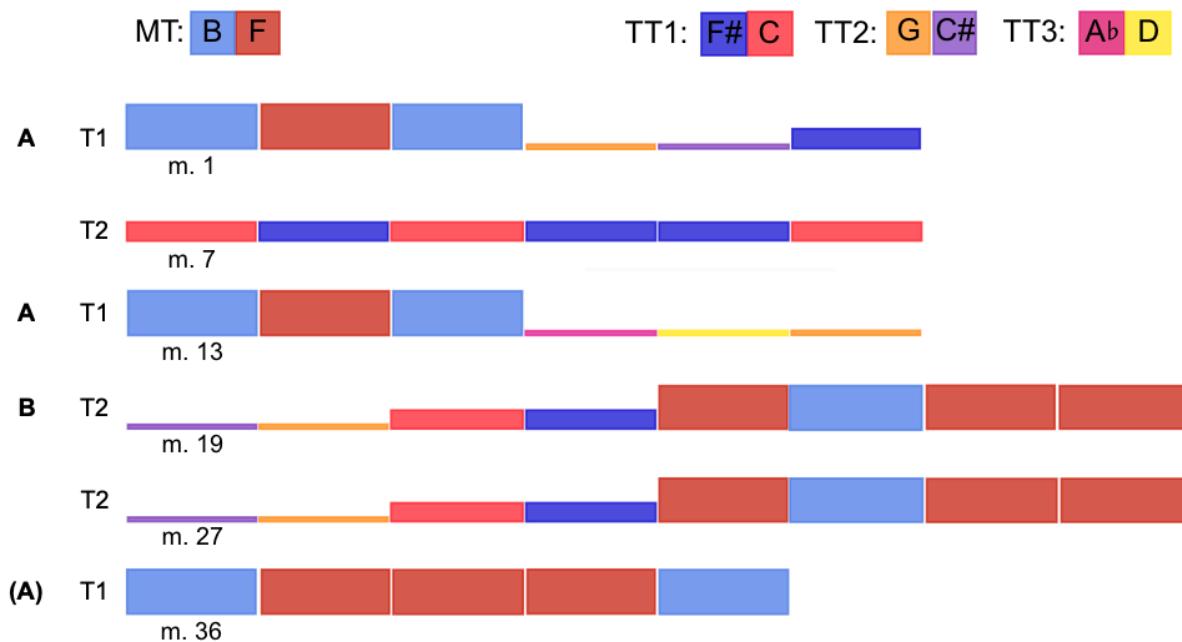
TT1 (C-F $\sharp$ ) and TT2 (G-C $\sharp$ ) behave like the dominant and subdominant of the poem respectively. The TT3 is a transitory tritone to set up for a tritonic sequence in half steps as seen in the B section of the color scheme in Table 3.4. In the A section, after the statement of the first theme with the MT, the TT2 drives the music away from the MT. The tonality then moves to the TT1 (C-F $\sharp$ ) in which the second theme is stated. In the B section, the TT2 (G-C $\sharp$ ) begins the cycle back to the MT via the TT1. If we label the MT as I, TT1 as V, and TT2 as IV, the sequence of the poem would look like this:

A: I - IV - V

B: IV - V - I

The sequence can also be traced more clearly in the color scheme of the poem in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4. The color scheme of *Poem* op. 59, no. 1.



The Galeyev-Vanechkina circle indicates ‘contemplation’ as the symbol of the B chord.

See Table 3.4. The color metaphor from Birren’s *Color Psychology and Color Therapy* suggests

a similar meaning, which is “spirituality and thought.”<sup>88</sup> The meaning of the contrasting color, the dark red of the F, is less clear on the Galeyev-Vanechkina circle, which is listed as “diversification of will.” In a conversation with Sabaneev, Scriabin described the color of F as “the red, bloody color of hell.”<sup>89</sup> The color’s proximity to C-red highlights the humanity of the symbol. Based on these facts, we can assume that it has darker connotations than the bright red color of C. When listening to the poem with these symbols and metaphors in mind, I interpreted the poem as a portrayal of the awe of the otherness. B-sky blue, which symbolizes contemplation, portrays the feeling of curiosity and F-dark red, a symbol of diversification of will, portrays a feeling of doubt and fear. The melody of the B-sky blue parts features an upward motion that resembles a question. It also utilizes a higher register, matching the lighter blue color. The melody of the F-dark red parts accentuates the dissonance by frequently using minor seconds and sevenths in m. 2 and mm. 25-26 creating conflict.

The poem has a veiled quality to it because of the tonal obscurity caused by the whole tone scale and the mystic chords. The colors in the score outline the moving tonality, and most importantly, show the location of the MT that the performer should note. The focus of the interpretation should be on bringing subtle contrasts reflective of the B and F relationship. Even though the song is in a monothematic form, it is possible to bring diversity to the poem by utilizing the contrasts. Scriabin is known to “highlight tonal color by abruptly juxtaposing assertive and languid moods.”<sup>90</sup> Pianists should consider using contrasting touch to show the difference between the blue and red colors. The sky-blue part can be played with a brighter touch and lighter weight of the arms. The red should be approached with more weight and fuller sound.

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<sup>88</sup> Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*, 126.

<sup>89</sup> Sabaneev, *Vospominaniya* (2000), 237; *Erinnerungen* (2005), 262. Quoted in Gawboy, “Alexander Scriabin’s Theurgy in Blue,” 197.

<sup>90</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 297.

MT: B Contemplation  
 F Diversification of Will  
 TT1: F# Creativity  
 C Will (Human)

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TT2: G Creative Play 65  
 C# Will (of the Creative Spirit)  
 TT3: Ab Movement of Spirit into Matter  
 D Joy

**Allegretto**  
*avec grâce et douceur*

Op. 59 Nr. 1

The musical score for Scriabin's Poème, Op. 59 no. 1, is presented in five staves. The music is divided into sections by colored boxes. Blue boxes highlight measures 6-7, 13-14, and 17. Red boxes highlight measures 7-8, 14-15, and 17. Purple boxes highlight measures 8-9 and 15-16. Yellow boxes highlight measure 16. Pink boxes highlight measure 15. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'p' (piano), 'rit.' (ritardando), and 'rit.' at the end. Measure numbers 6, 9, 13, and 17 are visible on the left side of the staves.

E. P. 12422

Example 3.5. Scriabin, *Poem*, Op. 59 no. 1.

21

25

29

32

36

*ad lib.*

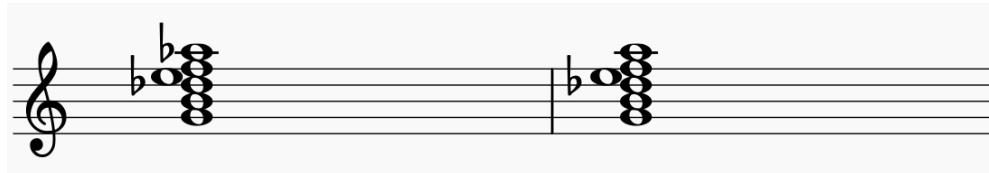
*mf ppp*

*mp ppp*

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Poem Op. 69, no. 2 (1913)

Poem op. 69, no. 2 was written after Scriabin's ninth sonata, "Black Mass." Scriabin's harmonic language evolved from utilizing the whole tone scale to the octatonic scale, which is made of alternating whole steps and half steps. The octatonic scale produces four tritones, which Scriabin could explore for forming tritone links. The octatonic scale is full of tritones and diminished seventh chords, was favored by composers who wished to portray fantastical, mystic elements.<sup>91</sup> Olivier Messiaen, another composer who composed with color-harmony associations, frequently used this scale as a symbol of God in his *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus*.<sup>92</sup> In this poem, Scriabin adjusts the mystic chord to fit the octatonic scale. The comparison of the two chords is shown below in Example 3.5: the left is the opening chord of the poem, and the right is the G-mystic chord. There is only a one-note difference between these chords, enabling Scriabin to keep his unique sonority prominent throughout the piece.



Example 3.6. Octatonic mystic chord and the original mystic chord.

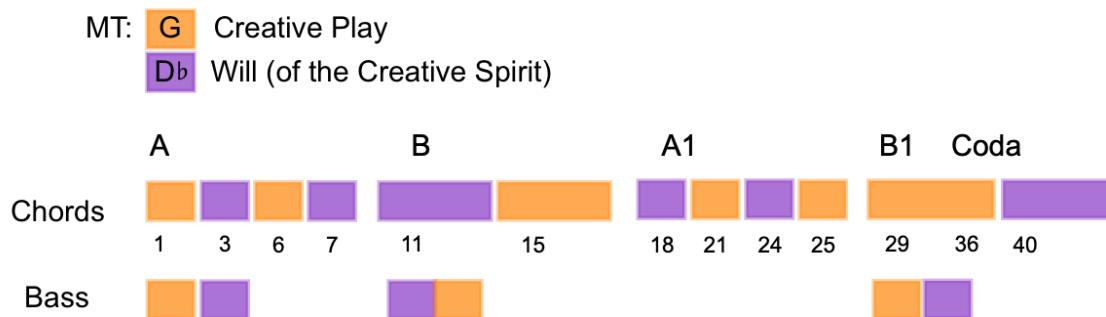
The structure and the harmonic makeup are simple. The poem is set in a binary form, ABA<sup>1</sup>B<sup>1</sup> with a coda. Scriabin exclusively uses one tritone link, G-D<sub>b</sub>, and its transpositions for harmony, which can be seen in orange (G) and purple (D<sub>b</sub>) in Table 3.5. Even though the poem

<sup>91</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 273.

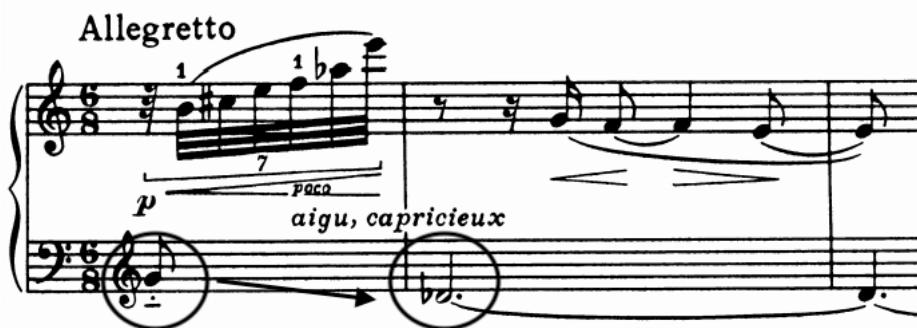
<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

is limited to two chords, the way he uses the tritone link in this poem is worth noting. Scriabin uses a tritonal bass movement as a motif, which can be seen in the left hand of the opening bar as seen in Example 3.7. Upon tracing the movement bass tritone link, a pattern shows a reversal of the original order of the tritone statement. The chords change more frequently within the boundaries of the bass tritones, but the movement of the bass is simple, which looks like this: G-Db → Db-G → G-Db. The bass outlines the tritone transposition of the main theme. Peña explains, “the transposed literal repetition principle was exploited in a large scale, which allowed Scriabin to return to the original sonority by the symmetry of the tritone.”<sup>93</sup> What is interesting about these tritonal bass movements is that they function as a signal of the tonal changes to come. For example, the bass changes at the beginning of sections B and B<sup>1</sup>, then the tonal change happens a few measures later. An awareness of the bass motif can help performers to prepare to adjust the tone color of the playing.

Table 3.5. The color scheme of *Poem op. 69, no. 2*



<sup>93</sup> Peña, “Development of Formal Structure in the Piano Poems of Alexander Scriabin,” 65.



Example 3.7. Bass motif G- D<sub>b</sub> in mm.1-2 of *Poem* op. 69, no. 1

G-orange signifies “creative play” and D<sub>b</sub>-purple is “Will” (of the Creative Spirit)

according to the Galeyev-Vanechkina circle purple as shown in Table 3.6. Orange is close to red, which induces “warm, active, and exciting qualities.”<sup>94</sup> Purple is the most spiritual color according to Blavatsky’s teaching of Theosophy, which is consistent with the symbol on the Galeyev-Vanechkina’s schema.

Table 3.6. The colors and their symbols in *Poem* Op. 69, no. 2.

| Tritone link | Tone                            | Colors | G & V's meaning               |
|--------------|---------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|
| MT           | G                               |        | Creative Play                 |
|              | C <sup>#</sup> / D <sub>b</sub> |        | Will (of the Creative Spirit) |

The poem has a playful, yet elusive feel. The opening section of the poem is marked “aigu, capricieux,” (“sharp and capricious”). The emotions associated with orange help in

<sup>94</sup> Birren, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*, 126.

matching the energy level of the poem. To fully understand the mystic element of the color purple, it was necessary to examine the musical gestures that dominate the melodic content of the piece. The first gesture introduced in the poem is a quickly ascending septuplet, a “flight” gesture Scriabin frequently used to depict “transporting bursts”<sup>95</sup> into ecstasy. It often has an “abrupt and spasmodic gesture.” The flight gesture is often contrasted by a languid, lyrical motif that represents the material world.<sup>96</sup>

The interpretation of the poem should focus on matching the energy of the material G-orange and the D<sub>b</sub>-purple. The travel from G to D<sub>b</sub> using the flight gesture gives a feeling of a spirited quest to achieve spiritual euphoria. The Russian translation of the flight gesture, *poriv*, represented “the desire to achieve ecstasy through spiritual ascent”<sup>97</sup> as an escape from the harsh reality of life. The symbols of the two notes, creative play and will of the creative spirit, suggest an unpredictable quality. Such a quality should be considered in moving through the changes of the colors, articulation, and tempos of the poem.

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<sup>95</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 314.

<sup>96</sup> Nataliya Sukhina, “Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915): Piano Miniature as Chronicle of His Creative Evolution; Complexity of Interpretive Approach and Its Implications” (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2008), 49.

<sup>97</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 314,

**Allegretto**

Op. 69 Nr. 2

**Allegretto**

*p* *aigu, capricieux*

*poco*

*avec une subite douceur* *pp*

*trem.* *sf*

*Più vivo*

*Tempo I*

*Più vivo*

E.P. #2422

Example 3.8. Scriabin, Poem, Op. 69, no. 2.

20

23 *cresc.*

27 *Più vivo*

32 *Tempo I* *mf* *p*

36 *Tempo I* *mf* *pp* *cresc.*

40 *8* *f* *pp* *m.s.*

E. P. 12422

### Vers la Flamme, op. 72 (1914)

*Vers la Flamme* was the last poem Scriabin wrote before his death in 1915. During this time, Scriabin was devoting most of his energy to the creation of *Mysterium*, his *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It would have been a major multisensory work that would transfigure the material world into a spiritual state. He was exploring the concept of ecstasy and used this poem to explore compositional styles that would best suit such an artwork. The poem resembles *Prometheus* in its mystic narrative. Scriabin explained that there is a clear direction in the music and that it portrays “bleakness to spiritual release and divine consummation,”<sup>98</sup> which shares the idea of the divine fire with *Prometheus*. For this reason, many elements feature the depiction of light and religious fervor.

*Vers la Flamme*, which translates “toward the flame,” was initially written for an orchestra, then as the first movement of a sonata. Sonata and poem were two of the composer’s preferred genres, and in this poem, the two merges together. The poem’s structure resembles a sonata form. The exposition of a sonata is mm. 1-80, the development section is mm. 81-106, and the recapitulation is mm. 107-137. According to Yun, the poem contains elements of sonata form, but it does not fit into a strict structure of sonata.<sup>99</sup> The flows between each section fluidly—the beginning of the development or the recapitulation are not as immediately apparent as it would be in a traditional sonata. Scriabin uses pianistic devices such as trills to obscure the lines between sections, focusing on the accumulation of energy instead of form.

The harmonic structure of the poem focuses on the tritonal relationship between E and B♭. E and B♭ sonorities (MT) are introduced as mystic chords and throughout the poem they go through many transformations. The examples are E<sup>-9</sup> in m. 40, Bm<sup>9</sup> in m. 75, and E<sup>7</sup> at the

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<sup>98</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 67.

<sup>99</sup> Yun, “Alexander Scriabin’s Late Piano Poems,” 213.

beginning of the recapitulation. The different versions of E and B $\flat$  sonorities are grouped under the color of the root note to highlight the tritone relationship. The TT1 is G-C $\sharp$ ; it does not appear until the development section but plays an important role in creating harmonic movement between E and B $\flat$ , much like the dominant function of the TT1 in *Poem* op. 59, no. 1. The other chords surrounding the MT are transitory, and they dictate the speed of the harmonic movement. For example, the tonality in the exposition changes quickly to escalate the music to resemble the growing intensity of light. The fast-paced transitions are usually reserved for the development section. However, Scriabin arranges the progression to achieve a sense of arrival at the start of the development section, marked “éclatant, lumineux” (“bursting with light”).

These changes in the tonalities are more noticeable because of how Scriabin employs traditional methods such as dominant function and voice-leading to give a sense of direction. For example, the B chord in m. 39 is used as a dominant to signal the arrival of E in measure 41. The B $\flat$  sonority of the development section arrives at E on m. 95 by creating a melodic bridge, E-F-F $\sharp$ , between m. 94 and 95. In m. 94, the pitch E of the B $\flat$  mystic chord moves to an F at the end of the measure, setting it up to resemble the movement of a leading tone. The F resolves up a half step to F $\sharp$  of the E $^9$  chord in m. 95, bringing a sense of arrival to the recapitulation. See Example 3.7.

Example 3.9. Scriabin, *Vers la Flamme*, voice leading in mm. 94-95.

Table 3.7. The colors and their symbols in *Vers la Flamme*, op. 72.

| Tritone link | Tone                            | Colors | G & V's meaning               |
|--------------|---------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|
| MT           | E                               |        | Dreams                        |
|              | B <sub>b</sub>                  |        | Lust or Passion               |
| TT1          | G                               |        | Creative Play                 |
|              | D <sub>b</sub> / C <sup>#</sup> |        | Will (of the Creative Spirit) |
|              | A <sub>b</sub>                  |        | Movement of Spirit            |
|              | D                               |        | Joy                           |
|              | C                               |        | Will (Human)                  |
|              | B                               |        | Contemplation                 |

The colors of the MT E chord and B $\flat$  chord, at a glance, do not reflect what we would typically associate as the colors of the main image of the poem, the divine fire. The E chord has the color of “frost” and B $\flat$  is the color of “steel.” In this interpretation of *Vers la Flamme*, the function of the color is to play a supporting role in making certain mystic images more evident. For example, the opening chord, E-frost, symbolizes “dreams” in the Galeyev-Vanechkina schema. See Table 3.7. Scriabin described the beginning of the poem as the portrayal of “the fog,”<sup>100</sup> and the performance direction of the opening theme is “sombre” (“melancholy”). The symbol and color of E help in imagining the emptiness and coldness of the fog. Scriabin also uses the B sonority with “avec une joie voilée” (“with veiled joy”), which brings a muted effect when applied with the color frost. E-frost brings out a different emotion at the end of the poem. Scriabin’s description of the ending is “blinding light,” and he uses musical gestures such as trills, tremolos, and portato chords to depict the “divine illumination.”<sup>101</sup> The B-frost-dream associations can be interpreted as ecstasy and divine consummation because of the color’s association with the spiritual world.<sup>102</sup> The presence of D-yellow, which symbolizes joy, in the recapitulation supports the portrayal of ecstasy.

B $\flat$ -steel symbolizes “lust or passion,” which is an unusual pairing for the color. The color of B $\flat$  was the subject of uncertainty because of conflicting information from the composer. The other color listed under B $\flat$  in the Galeyev-Vanechkina circle is rose, which seems to match the color metaphor of “lust or passion” better than steel. However, since steel was the original color used in his chromesthetic symphony, *Prometheus*, further exploration was needed to consider the possible meaning of the color. In this poem, Scriabin uses the B $\flat$ -steel for parts that resemble the sound of the bells. Historian Boris Schwarz explained that for Russians, bells

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<sup>100</sup> Ballard, Bengtson, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 67.

<sup>101</sup> Sukhina, “Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915),” 48.

<sup>102</sup> Scriabin considered blue and violet hues as the most spiritual colors. (See chapter 2)

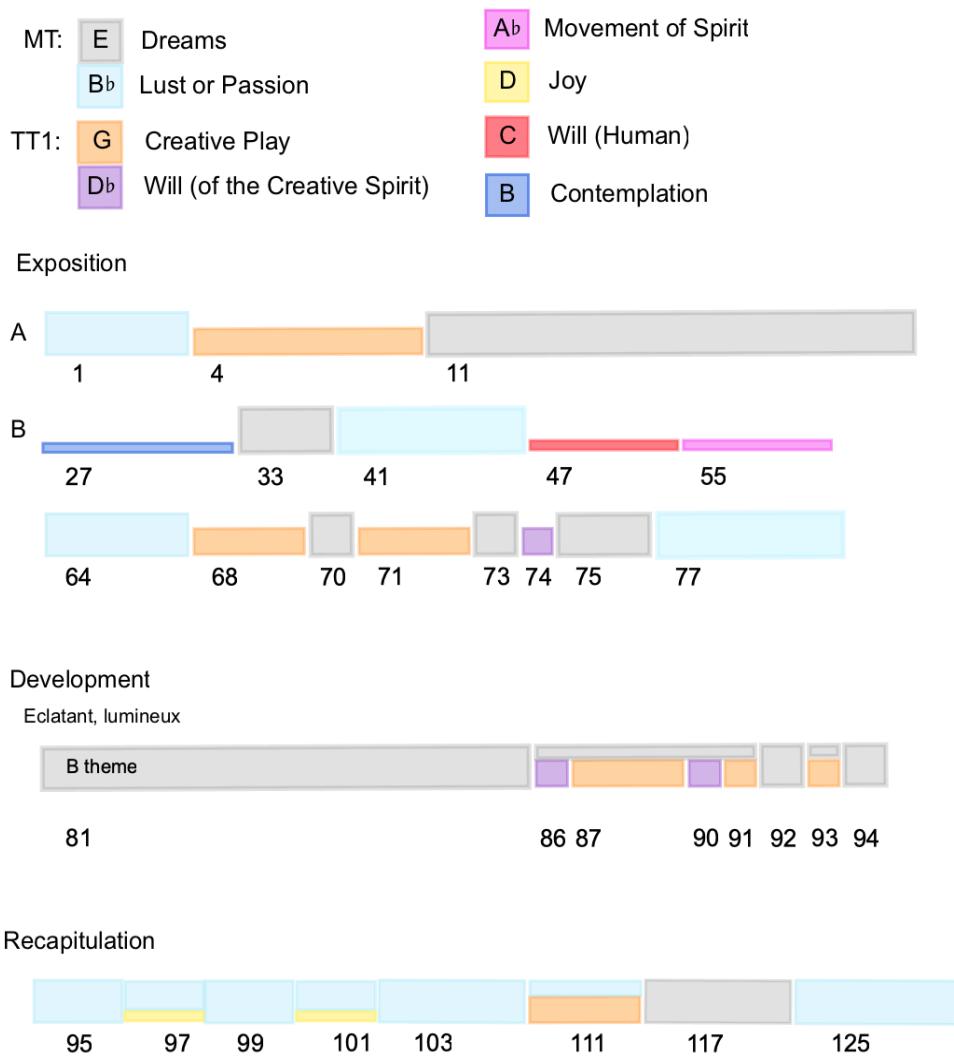
signified a “joyous, ominous, alarming and beautiful part of the gamut of emotions the spirit or soul must pass through before the final attainment of ecstasy.”<sup>103</sup> In this context, the metallic element of the color steel matches the musical gestures of the bells. Bells are like a spiritual calling, and Galeyev-Vanechkina’s symbol “passion” of B♭-steel can be interpreted as spiritual fervor in response to the bells.

The development and recapitulation sections are colored in layers in an attempt to show the increasing intensity and drive from tritone to the other. It also amplifies the musical gestures like the clanging of the bells in the development. The layers do not reflect the theoretical analysis of the chords in each measure, but rather a movement of one tone of the MT to the other. See Table 3.8.

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<sup>103</sup> Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-1970* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 323.

Table 3.8. The color scheme of *Vers la Flamme*, op. 72.



The musical direction of *Vers la Flamme* is possible to understand even to those who are not familiar with the mystic elements of Scriabin's music. However, studying the musical gestures together with the symbols associated with the colors of the MT can offer a well-articulated performance of the poem. The implications of the colors associated with the main tonality are more complex than observed before. Colors in *Poems* op. 59 and op. 69 point to singular emotions, whereas the colors in op. 72 can portray several emotions and images depending on the progression of the mystic narrative. A possible explanation for the change in

how Scriabin used color could be that he was exploring new ways of using colors for *Mysterium*. Forman states that “Scriabin planned to use contrapuntal combinations of elements of different arts, as well as magical incantations, aromas and the colour element that would have not always been correspondent to the harmony, as it did in *Prometheus*, but would develop according to its own logic.”<sup>104</sup>

*Vers la Flamme* should be approached with the prolonged escalation of intensity in mind, controlling the dynamics carefully. Ballard, Bengston, and Young explained that the poem is “a study in measured tremolos, and its restless churning propels the piece to its smoldering conclusion.”<sup>105</sup> A suggestion for the B♭-steel parts is to express the metallic resonance of brassy bells. As the music escalates, the metallic element should be intensified with a sharper touch. E-frost parts should be examined with the composer’s remarks on the score in addition to the awareness of the mystical progression. The opening should have a hazy and bleak sound, and the ecstasy section should be approached with much brightness in the tone to depict the forcefulness of the divine light.

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<sup>104</sup> Forman, “The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin,” 93.

<sup>105</sup> Ballard, Bengston, and Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion*, 67.

MT: E Dreams      Ab Movement of the Spirit  
 Bb Lust or Passion      D Joy  
 TT1: G Creative Play      C Will (Human)  
 Db Will (of the Creative Spirit)      B Contemplation

**VERS LA FLAMME**  
 (1914)  
**Poème**

Op. 72

**Allegro moderato**  
**34**

**6**  
**12**  
**20**  
**28**

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Example 3.10. Scriabin, *Vers la Flamme*, Op. 72.

34 *poco*

40 *avec une émotion naissante*  
*pochiss.*

45 *avec une joie voilée*  
*pp*

49 *b.p.*

53 *br.*

57 *br.*

61 *de plus en plus animé*

*p* cresc. poco a poco

65 *avec une joie de plus en plus tumultueuse*

*p* cresc. poco a poco

68

71 m.s.

74 m.s.

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77

m.s.  
5  
4  
3  
2

78

79

80

81 Éclatant, lumineux      comme une fanfare

*ff*      *ma dolce*

82

68

83

84

85

86

87

88

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89

90

91

92

93

94

70

95

96

97

98

99

100

101

102

103

104

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105

*p cresc.*

106

107

*m.d.*

108

109

110

111

112

113

114

115

116

\*) Siche Revisionsbericht | Voir Revisionsbericht | See Revisionsbericht  
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8

120 121 122 123 124 125 126 127 128 129 130 131 132 133

m.d.  
m.s.  
ff  
ff

E. P. 12359

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Scriabin's harmonic language went through significant changes throughout the late period: it went from the Chopinesque harmonies to later what is considered the beginning of atonal music. His push to include his mystic visions into his music is remarkably consistent. From the conception of *Prometheus*, Scriabin spent the rest of his life exploring ways to bring spiritual ecstasy through multisensory artwork. His desire to depict ecstasy permeates through his compositions of the late period. *Poem op. 59, no. 1* contained a similar narrative of *Prometheus*: a divine consummation of the material and the spiritual. *Poem op. 69, no. 2* showed humanity's desire to escape to a spiritual sanctuary away from reality. *Vers la Flamme* depicts the end of the world, an apocalypse, with the material world being consumed by the divine light.

Upon applying his music with color-tone associations created in *Prometheus*, colors show that there is consistency in his mystic agenda behind his music. The contrasts of colors in the score show the polarity in the music. Through the polarity, we see the coexistence and the struggle between the material and the spiritual world. Colors help in visualizing the contrast and the relationship between the two realms.

The purpose of this research was to take musical works based on abstract concepts such as Scriabin's mysticism, and examine the effect of color metaphors in the interpretation process. The benefit of mindfulness of color, as the research has revealed, brings clarity and richness to the music-making experience. When used in harmonic analysis, colors can underline tonality and show patterns that otherwise would have been missed. Colors used as

metaphors or symbols in the interpretation process of a piece of music can articulate the emotional or psychological content of the music. The orange in *Poem* op. 69, no.2 helped in narrowing the emotion to playfulness despite the flight gestures that could sound sinister if not approached with the right tone. The frosty blue of *Vers la Flamme* helped articulate the coldness and emptiness of the opening theme. The sky blue, which historically has represented spirituality and contemplation, helped in explaining the dreamy and veiled atmosphere of *Poem op. 59. no. 1.*

Scriabin's symbols gathered from the composer's correspondences and interviews by Bulat M. Galeyev and Irina L. Vanechkina, give us a glimpse of the complex mystic world of Scriabin. Even though the Galeyev-Vanechkin circle was created using Scriabin's own words, we cannot know the precise meaning behind each symbol of his color-tone associations and the method of his chromesthetic writing. However, through this research, we have found that exploring elements of color in Scriabin's music through the analysis of polarity assisted in defining and interpreting the mystic narrative in Scriabin's piano poems. The analysis focused on tracing the root note's tritonal movement throughout each poem. The analysis did not show other elements such as transpositions of central sonorities or the voice leading. The focus on only tracing the root notes was a conscious decision to provide a performer with a simple visual guide that outlined essential psychological or mystical elements for practical performance purposes. A further development on the method of color-coding is needed to reflect a detailed analysis of motives and gestures for an in-depth study of his piano works.

The interpretation provided in this research might not be agreed upon by everyone, but it provides an accessible method of color-coding the tritones that performers can use to construct a personal interpretation. Color-tone associations differ from person to person, but the color-tone associations developed in *Prometheus* provide a unique opportunity to experience Scriabin's music through his colors.

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