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Towards a Performance of Scriabin's Sonata No. 6, Op. 62: A Practice-led Exploration

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Abstract

Pianist and composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) is regarded as one of the most unique and important innovators of the early modernist Russian school. His search for new and more complex sonorities – as well as his evolving belief in the role that his music would play in the spiritual future of society – led to experimentation with octatonic, whole-tone and bi-tonal harmonic and melodic patterns, most clearly demonstrated in the formation of the mystic chord. The extra-musical significance of these sonic explorations are related by Scriabin in the unusual descriptions found in the scores of his late piano music, which suggest that the musical content is closely connected to Scriabin's own very individual philosophical belief system.

There has already been research in this area, connecting the music of the late piano sonatas with Mystic Russian Symbolism, as well as Scriabin's orchestral *Prometheus Op. 60* with the occultism and mysticism of Theosophy. My contribution in this regard lies in a detailed, practice-led research project based on the interpretation of the score instructions found in the Sixth Piano Sonata, Op. 62, in which I connect aspects of the music to a detailed study of the philosophical content of Scriabin's unfinished libretto to the *Prefatory Act* and the Theosophy-inspired concept of the resulting *Mysterium*. In doing so I suggest how these score descriptions may be interpreted and put into practice, based on such research findings.

This complex process of performative interpretation employs multiple methodologies including score analysis, factual research relating to biographical and historical context, critical recording analysis and ongoing self-reflection. Crucially, practice is used throughout to judge the validity and relevance of analytical and research findings, as well as a means of research in itself, in which new ideas have been discovered through the act of live performance. The value of first-person research is presented in a wider musicological and performance context, through which it is argued that such practice-led research has the potential to lead to a more inclusive and open research environment.

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Introduction

I first encountered Scriabin's (1872-1915) Piano Sonata No. 6, Op. 62 (1911) as a second-year undergraduate student, having already spent several years working my way through his various sets of Preludes and Etudes. The same edition that contained these earlier works from the period 1887-1903 also contained a number of works from Scriabin's late period, including the *Three Etudes*, Op. 65 and the *Five Preludes*, Op. 74, which I sight-read many times: I had always been enthralled by what I perceived as unusual, sensuous and extraordinary harmonies, and strange melodic configurations. Out of curiosity, I decided to tackle one of the late piano sonatas. I knew none of them at the time, but decided initially to learn Sonata No. 9 Op. 68, rather superficially because it had the ominous title 'Black Mass'. It so happened that the music shop was out of copies of the Ninth Sonata, so I purchased the one sonata they did have in stock: the Sixth.

My initial approach to this work was largely intuitive and practical. I remember being struck by the complexity of the piano textures, the beauty (and ugliness) of certain harmonies, but above all the extraordinary and down-right strange performance markings/descriptions. Some seemed to be perfectly realisable: 'with restrained warmth', for instance, suggested a certain holding back of tempo; 'winged' could be delivered through a lighter, faster touch; others – such as 'the terror surges forward', or 'the dream takes shape' – were far less clear, my first thought being that as Scriabin was largely viewed as an eccentric and mystic, this was simply his imagination running wild.

In 2009, a live recording was made of a performance I gave of Sonata No. 6 at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, as part of a 'Scriabin Festival' I had

organised.¹ Seven years separate that early performance and my most recent recording of this work. Listening to these two recordings, it is immediately apparent that there are some fundamental differences of interpretation, and whilst it may be possible to put some of these down to the different acoustics and pianos with which each was recorded – the second was recorded in the beautiful acoustic of Henry Wood Hall, whilst the first was recorded in the unforgiving Music Hall at Guildhall – I believe that virtually all of the differences are due to the research and analysis I have carried out in relation to Sonata No. 6 in the interim period. Most significantly, I would argue that the later recording represents a much more effective and cohesive performance, in which the music is allowed to unfold more naturally and with greater clarity of characterisation. Whilst I will have more to say about these terms – i.e. ‘naturalness’ and ‘clarity’ in performance – in Chapters 4-6, I have come to consider them crucial aspects of the interpretation of Scriabin’s late piano music.

I regard ‘naturalness’ to be aesthetically related to making performative decisions that enhance the qualities which I perceive as inherent in the music, and not distorting the music in a way I judge to be contrary to these qualities; these may include choices relating to tempo manipulation, rubato, dynamic inflection, phrasing, pedalling, in response to such phenomena as harmony, melody, rhythm and texture; – I discuss this further in Chapter 4.3.² Clarity of character has also become an important aesthetic value for me and I argue in Chapter 1.6 that we respond most readily as listeners to the expressive and descriptive nature of music, in which music may be consciously and unconsciously linked with emotion, mood and character.

While preparing the 2015 performance as part of this practice-led research

¹ This recording is available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNJ_M57GRdY> and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXF45kz2Px4>>

² Cook also discusses the idea of ‘natural’ performance, and such concepts as ‘arched phrasing’ corresponding to the natural feeling of the music (2013, pp.176-223).

undertaking, I developed a deeper comprehension of what type of ‘characters’ the music may be interpreted as representing, and a far greater understanding of how a descriptive sense of character may be related to, and realised in practice. Clarity of characterisation, which I believe to be present in the later recording, is not necessarily related to the exaggeration of such things as melodic shape, and changes of tempo and dynamic – an approach I had adopted in the earlier recording – but instead to a more subtle approach, in which I have come to understand that character in music is related thoroughly to one’s interpretation of the musical materials and their context, and that some musical material may best be characterised not through clarity, but in accordance with its indefinite and more suggestive nature. This doesn’t necessarily mean that an audience would agree, but it is an artistic judgement I make based on my present perception of Scriabin’s Sixth Sonata from a performance perspective.

Having performed Scriabin’s Sixth Sonata frequently over the past ten years, my current interpretation only emerged when I began to be convinced that I had found a link in my research between this work and the content of the composer’s *Prefatory Act* libretto. Dating from 1913-15, this text is the most extensive expression of Scriabin’s personal view of philosophy and art and describes a process of spiritual evolution and creation, ultimately ending in universal transfiguration. The perception of a connection between text and music has led to a more profound understanding of what Scriabin’s more unusual performance descriptions may allude to; according to my research findings, rather than being strange expressions of eccentricity, they are instead very carefully thought out allusions to musical symbolism. In practice, this has been manifest in the different ‘characters’ I now perceive as being potential in the music. This stems from my perception of the symbolisation of certain elements of Scriabin’s philosophy through specific melodic and harmonic patterns, and my

understanding of the manner in which these tonal patterns representing certain characters are most effectively conveyed in performance.

In this respect, this thesis is based on the assumption that there can exist a cohesive connection between music performance and research, and that practice can form an integral part of the research process. This is not to suggest that a great performance cannot exist without research, which is understood here as systematic scholarly investigation; however, what I offer is a personal account that I hope to be of use and interest to fellow musicians, both as a study of Scriabin's compositional world, and as an exploration and example of the process of this type of practice-led research. I return to the value of first-person perspective as part of practice-led research methodology in the next chapter.

The primary research questions, to which I return throughout the thesis, may be broadly summarised as follows:

- How does an understanding of the historical context of Scriabin's philosophical world relate to a contemporary performance context of his music?
- To what extent does my intuitive notion that both research and analysis are beneficial to practice ring true, and if so, how has this been ascertained through this research undertaking?
- If the notion, as put forward by some eminent writers, that formal analysis should come first, and should be 'translated' into performance later seems to be increasingly problematic, what then is the nature of the process that actually takes place in preparing a performance, and to what extent does practice take the leading role?

- To what extent is an emphasis on projecting musical structure desirable in performance, and how can the discrepancy between fixed, analytically perceived structures, and fluid performance-based structures be resolved?
- Is research always relevant to practice, or are there instances in which some aspects of research and/or analysis are of great scholarly interest but not clearly related to practice?
- From a broader perspective, how does my practice-led study relate to a wider context of academic research and artistic performance?

In keeping with most practice-led undertakings in the arts, I have adopted, during my research, a variety of methods and I discuss how these relate to the work of others in Chapter 1. These methods can be summarised as covering the following points:

- Employing practice throughout as a means of judging the relevance of theoretical research findings.
- Qualitatively analysing my own recorded performances, as well as the ongoing practice, as part of reflectively and critically engaging with my artistic practice in order to judge and understand the effectiveness of certain performance choices, many of which have their origins in research.
- Using music analysis as a means of discovering what it is in the music that may suggest certain nuanced and complex characters, which my research into the *Prefatory Act* has revealed; and employing practice as a means of suggesting how this analysis may be most effectively used in the process of performance preparation.
- Carrying out ‘practice-related’ score analysis at the instrument so as to also take into account the physical, tactile nature of practice.

As part of a practice-led investigation, much of my work is inevitably based on informed

subjective interpretation, and my knowledge and experience as a performing pianist. The theoretical and historical aspects of my research, such as investigating Scriabin's life, the compositional context of Sonata No. 6, elements of Scriabin's philosophy, and the content of the score, have been based on existing relevant literature on Scriabin and his music, including accounts from people who knew the composer personally – such as the composer and writer Leonid Sabaneev, and Scriabin's brother-in-law Boris de Schloezer. Nevertheless, these texts must be treated with caution as they were written retrospectively, and provide the authors' understanding of Scriabin's philosophy, not necessarily representative of Scriabin's own. Similarly, the text for the *Prefatory Act* that I have used is a translation from the original Russian by Simon Morrison, and whilst this may be the most reliable translation currently available, it must also be approached with care as there are often several ways of translating the same text, and words in some languages occasionally do not have an exact English equivalent.

In Chapter 1, I offer a detailed summary of my work within a wider practice-led research environment, drawing critical comparisons with the work of others. Chapter 2 presents the historical, sociological and biographical context of Scriabin's Sonata No. 6, as well as a summary of the relevant aspects of the *Prefatory Act* libretto, before considering in Chapter 3 how this text relates to how we may hear aspects of Scriabin's late-style harmonic language – with particular attention given to preconceptions pertaining to the dominant harmonic function, and the implications this may have on performance choices. In Chapter 4, I argue that an understanding of Scriabin's interest in Theosophy, and its relation to the *Prefatory Act*, may have consequences for how we interpret Scriabin's approach to small- and large-scale musical structure in the Sixth Sonata. I offer a detailed description of one possible performance interpretation

of the Sonata in Chapter 5, in which I integrate and draw together aspects of practice and analysis, within the context of the research undertaken into the content of the *Prefatory Act* libretto.

The research elements of my study – historical and biographical context, musical analysis and performance – are certainly not mutually exclusive, and neither were they carried out in a predefined order. Rather I have found that these research elements form a fluid whole, interacting continuously with one another; as new knowledge and interpretations were formed, the validity of others were strengthened or called into question. In this way my conclusions have been continually – even infinitely – emergent. Whilst other researchers may form different conclusions based on their own interests and methods, I nevertheless hope that this study will reveal the workings and processes of one artist-researcher, and will indicate the varied methods employed in preparing music for performance. In doing so, I hope this study will be of interest to fellow practitioners in this field, as well as providing interesting research material to those studying the late works of Scriabin from a more purely musicological point of view.

Chapter 1

Part A

Practice-led Research: The Artist as Practitioner and Researcher

As this study has progressed it has become evident that one develops a clearer idea about the place of one's research within a wider context only after having been immersed in it for some time, and so I have found it almost impossible to contextualise my work without first carrying the majority of it out. The nature of practice-led research is such that it is fluid, in the sense that as your investigation deepens some material begins to take centre stage, whilst other material is discarded to the scrap heap. It is for this reason that this chapter is written largely retrospectively, as only now is it clear how my investigation into the performance of Scriabin's Sonata No. 6 fits into a larger research context. Only now do I know what information was relevant and which areas of investigation most fruitful. This is partly due to the nature of artistic practice and performance interpretation, which is changeable, even unpredictable; the performance outcome varies every time it is carried out, and the interpretation, which is reached through an emergent network of practice, analysis and research, is subject to continued questioning; as new knowledge is gained, the culturally based artistic experience of the work continues to evolve.

1.1 Practice-based research, practice-as-research, practice-led research

Scholarly material relating to the relationship between practice and research, and the exploration of the notion of practice as a form of research, has become more and more plentiful in the last two decades. Work within this field spans different genres – ranging from video game design, dance, theatre studies, visual and fine art and, of

course, music – and exists under many guises: not only as ‘practice-based research’, ‘practice-as-research’ and ‘practice-led research’, but also as ‘applied research’, ‘action research’, ‘reflective practice’, ‘research-informed practice’, ‘research by practice’. One reason for such an array of terms – often occurring within a single discipline – stems not only from the range of art-forms encompassed, but also from the variety of methods and ideas used in the investigation of the interconnectedness of practice and research, and the subjective nature that this type of investigation can take on. For example, it is quickly apparent when scanning through the plentiful discussions based around practice and research that the terms themselves have different implications and meanings for different practitioners.

In the field of music, research that is related to musical practice in some way has emerged in the past two decades partly by way of a critical reaction to what has been perceived by some as overly musicological approaches to music analysis, research and criticism, in which the role, concerns, and even influence of performance and performers are not considered or addressed – to the point at which performance appears relegated to a place of lesser importance. The aforementioned terminological plurality also prevails in music, and terms such as ‘practice-based research’, ‘practice-as-research’ and ‘practice-led research’ are not always used consistently throughout the literature. For example, whilst most funding bodies use the term ‘practice-as-research’, this often encompasses what others describe as ‘practice-based research’ or ‘practice-led research; Nicholas Cook further expands on the problematic nature of these terms, pointing out that even the term ‘practice’ has multiple definitions and connotations (2015, pp. 11-13). It is clear, then, that clarification is required of the practitioner with regard to what assumptions are to be inferred by the chosen terminology.

Approaches to practice and research in music may be broadly summarised as follows; these categories also clarify how the various terms related to method are used consistently throughout this thesis:

1. Practice-based research: analysis of practice/performance and of practitioners/performers from a musical/psychological perspective, often producing quantitative results.³
2. Practice-as-research: using practice as a means of generating new knowledge, which is typically presented in a practical format. Based on the idea that practice can in itself be a form of knowledge without the need for textual discourse.⁴
3. Practice-led research: practice is still the central method of enquiry, but the unique requirements of practice/performance, and of practitioners/performers, are used as the basis for more in-depth analysis and research, resulting in both practical and textual outcomes.⁵ Research findings feed back into practice in an identifiable manner, and there is a continuous back-and-forth movement between theoretical and practical enquiry. Instrument-based research can be regarded as a sub-category of practice-led research that uses the physicality of practice as a means of exploration and as fundamental to our understanding of music.⁶

In the following section, I offer a brief exploration of some of the literature which I consider to fall into the above categories, and which I perceive as relevant to my own work. I draw out those methodologies which are comparable to my own and comment critically on how the performer-researcher may benefit from this knowledge.

³ See, for example: Goebel et al (2014, pp. 221-239), Friberg et al (2014, pp. 240-259), Timmers et al (2014, pp. 304-33-), King (2006, pp. 142-164), Wanderley et al (2006, pp. 165-191), Eldson (2006, pp. 192-207), Davidson (2006, pp. 208-226), Clarke (1995), Dodson (2011), Hatten (2004).

⁴ See, for example: Bolt (2007), Barrett (2007), Kershaw (2009), Haseman (2006).

⁵ See, for example: Rink (2002), Lester (1995).

⁶ See, for example: Dogantan-Dack (2015), Hill (2002), Rink (2015).

1.2 Practice-based research in music

A significant portion of practice-based research in music relates to the analysis of performance, which includes two broad categories that are of relevance to this study:

- Exploring movement and physical gesture, including breathing;
- Studying recorded and live performances.

Many of these areas of study employ quantitative data collection methods, and a subsequent analysis of this data. In this kind of research, the emphasis is on the analysis of practice, and the research is therefore not necessarily undertaken to suggest how such data may lead to conclusions that could influence future acts of practice. Whilst I have not employed quantitative data collection in my own work, I will argue below that critical performance analysis – which may fall into either of the above categories – can play an integral and vital role in the making of performative judgments for performers.

Movement and physical gesture:

Studies by Jane Davidson (1991, 2002, 2006), Eric Clarke (Clarke & Davidson 1998, Clarke 1995 and 2002a and 2002b), and others have investigated and theorised about the relationship between the physical gestures musicians make and the music they play, suggesting, for example, that some movements – such as those made between phrases – are fundamentally similar among pianists (Davidson 2002: 146-7).⁷ Aside from the potential to nurture an awareness in performers of the possible reasons for certain gestures, this research literature also suggests how gesture and movement in performance may influence the listener's perception of the music, helping the listener to perceive more acutely the expressiveness of the performance observed.

⁷ For a similar investigation into breathing and piano performance, see Elaine King (2006, p. 160).

I term the research by Davidson, Clarke and King ‘practice-based’, rather than ‘practice-led’ as they do not take account of how the research findings may feedback into, and potentially influence future acts of performance.⁸ However this type of research can potentially become ‘practice-led’ in the sense that physical gesture can help to convey the expressiveness of the music, as understood by the performer, to an audience. For some performers the consideration of the listener’s perception of a work may be of less importance; however, I have always found this to be a valuable consideration for my own formation of an interpretation as it helps me to focus on how I hear and understand the music I am performing. Whilst it is likely that different listeners will have different responses – and it is not my intention to investigate how audience members may respond differently to different performances and methods of presentation – I have always believed that part of my role as a performer is to attempt to outwardly ‘project’ certain aspects of the music’s expressiveness, such as its possible mood and character, through sound and physical gesture. This is especially pertinent in light of some of the findings in this field of research, which suggest that the visual aspects of performances are extremely relevant to audience perception.⁹

In the following study of Scriabin’s Sonata No. 6, I consider the visual ‘choreography’ of performance that may be helpful at certain points in the music. Whilst I feel that generally musicians do not move in ways contrary to their perception of the character of the music – though this may not always be the case – and many movements constitute a natural response to the sound, more conscious consideration may be helpful in certain contexts.¹⁰ Much of my focus in the following chapters relates

⁸ For a more ‘practice-led’ approach to movement, see Pierce (2003).

⁹ For more detailed examples see Peter Eldson’s (2006) work relating to Keith Jarrett, as well as Davidson (2006).

¹⁰ For further discussions regarding conscious and unconscious movements see Hatten (2001) and Kendon (1996).

to the changing ‘character’ of the music, and how this may relate to aspects of harmony, melody, phrasing, voicing, inflection, tempo and texture. In this respect, I will refer to aspects of physical gesture as they ‘translate’ the characters I perceive in Scriabin’s Sixth Sonata into physical movements, the latter exuding the same qualities.

Analysis of performance – recorded and live

Both CHARM – AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music – and the CMPCP – AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice – have aimed to place the study of music as performance at the core of their research.¹¹ The CMPCP have developed, and made available online, software known as the Sonic Visualiser, which enables anyone to temporally map certain quantifiable aspects of any recording uploaded into the program.¹² One result is the visual representation of the changing tempo throughout a performance, which can be used in studying rubato and phrasing. Despite the clear focus on recordings and performance, Cook suggests that the work undertaken by CHARM and CMPCP has been more musicological in the sense that they do not employ practice itself as a research method to generate new knowledge (2015, p. 19). Nevertheless, some of this research has had clear relevance for performers.

A project in this vein was carried out at the University of Wolverhampton headed by Amanda Bayley, in which she worked with composer Michael Finnissy and the Kreutzer Quartet, focusing on the collaboration between composer and performers, and their respective roles, in preparing Finnissy’s Second String Quartet for performance – a work written for the project. The project examined the processes undergone, and the violinist and cellist co-authored some of the resulting written

¹¹ The CHARM and CMPCP were first funded by the AHRC in 2004 and 2009 respectively.

¹² Available at: <<http://www.sonicvisualiser.org/>>

material. The project resulted in a published DVD, in which the quartet presented a performance of the music worked upon during the research process; the resultant document was intended as ‘a valuable aid to performers in the intricacies of communication between the players’ (Divine Art, 2012); the outcomes, addressing performative concerns, were intended to influence and aid future performances.¹³

Whilst all research has the potential to become relevant to future acts of practice, I have so far made a distinction between the more musicological processes of practice-based studies and practice-led research; the latter made distinct by the consideration given to acts of future performance – I would therefore suggest that the project described above contains elements of both practice-based and practice-led research. In this respect, I view my own work as a stimulus to further and future acts of interpretation and performance. Whilst my study does not employ in depth performance analysis using established empirical methods – some of which have been discussed above – I have drawn some of my conclusions from the comparison of the two recordings I have made of Scriabin’s Sixth Sonata, some six years apart.

My evolving performative interpretation of Scriabin’s Sonata No. 6 is understood within the context of existing recordings of this work, and the artistic practice of other pianists performing Scriabin. I was already aware of many of these recordings when I started the research and have continued to be influenced by them throughout the research process. Recordings – such as those of Sofronitsky and Richter – as well as my own work with the Norwegian pianist Hakon Austbo, have opened my ears to a range of different interpretative possibilities, against which I have judged and questioned my own performative interpretation, occasionally incorporating new stylistic and musical approaches into my own practice as a result. Within this

¹³ For a similar study see Davidson and Good (2002).

context, I have been engaged in a constant process of reflection on and reaction to my own performances, as well as the performances of others; though this process has not utilised data collection methods, and has not always been documented, it has formed an essential self-reflective, self-critical, on-going process through which I have continually evaluated the success of each performance undertaken.

1.3 Practice-as-research

Whilst the definition of the term 'practice-as-research' is far from universally agreed, the most significant way in which I perceive this form of research to differ from practice-based and practice-led research lies in the somewhat controversial notion that practice itself can be presented as a form of research. Whilst the idea that knowledge can be created through the act of practice is one that resonates with my own work,¹⁴ where disagreement occurs is whether it is necessary to present this new knowledge in written discourse in order for it to be considered research, or whether practice itself constitutes a valid form of presentation.

The work of Picasso (Steinberg, 1988 and Barrett, 2007), Hockney (Bolt, 2007), Schoenberg, Pollock and Gould (Coessens et al. 2009) have all been put forward as representing examples of practice-as-research, in which the resulting composition, artwork or recording is understood as constituting new knowledge. This concept differs fundamentally from my own work in which I articulate the new knowledge not only in and through performance, but also in a form that is distinct from the practice itself; knowledge is not 'locked into' the act of practice, but is formed through following a multidisciplinary trajectory, encompassing analysis, biographical/historical research,

¹⁴ For examples, see Haseman (2006) and Bolt (2007), who terms knowledge produced in practice 'practical knowledge'.

critical recording and live performance analysis, as well as practice itself.

Jane Davidson describes her working definition of ‘practice-as-research’ as finding ‘ways of exploring how real-time reflective actions and critical decisions ... [lead] to immediate change’ (2015, pp. 99), exploring and discussing the processes and decision making carried out during practice, and the potential uses of a reflective, retrospective understanding of these processes.¹⁵ This differs from other examples of practice-as-research, in which practice itself is presented as knowledge. Davidson’s focus is very much on how the knowledge gained through the processes of practice can be documented and reflected upon, and how conclusions may effectively feedback into future acts of practice. In this sense, her understanding of ‘practice-as-research’ is closer to my notion of ‘practice-led research’. Davidson describes and discusses a number of studies which she considers to be *reflective* practice-as-research, in which qualitative data pertaining to working processes and practices is gathered throughout the act of practice, and then later reflected upon so as to suggest ways in which the acquired knowledge may be utilised in future acts of practice. Davidson goes on to summarise a type of practice-as-research termed ‘action-research’, which, it may be argued, bears a similarity to my own acts of practice, employing a similar on-going process of reflective ‘trialling’:

During the planning stage, the participant researcher identifies, organises and uses relevant materials to inform their actions. They then ‘act’ by trialling, collecting and questioning what they have planned. Then, they ‘observe’ by analysing, reporting and sharing their outcomes, which in turn leads them to ‘reflect’ by evaluating, revisiting and then implementing change, eventually returning them to the start of the action cycle (2015, p. 100).

Though Davidson’s description relates to a study somewhat different from my own,

¹⁵ Some refer to this ‘real-time’ process as *self-reflexive*, drawing a distinction between ‘live’ performance processes and retrospective self-reflection (Freeman, 2010, pp. 177-184). See also the work of the conductor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2009), and ethnomusicologists Mantle Hood (1960) and John Baily (2008), who explore and analyse the creative act of composition and performance as a process, and how such explorations may feed back into practice through reflection.

the process is comparable: the ‘act’ is practice, through which the value and relevance of research and analytical findings are assessed; the resulting act of practice is then critically judged and further interpretative adjustments implemented; the process is then repeated, and has the potential to be repeated *ad infinitum*.

Similar to Davidson, a crucial aspect of my work is the process of on-going, critically reflective practice, and it is this aspect which leads to my preference for a mode of presentation removed from the act of practice – and therefore for the term ‘practice-led research’ with regard to my own work. In this respect, it is also my hope that my work will contribute usefully to the wider research literature, as a way of provoking further research and discourse. The ambiguity of what exactly is learnt from ‘practical’ knowledge is made clearer and tangible through a process of critical reflection, which I have found to be a vital part of my own interpretative process. As far as my own study is concerned, knowledge has not just been formed in practice, but also through analysis, historical/biographical research, and critical performance and recording analysis; furthermore, audio examples are presented throughout as a means of demonstrating interpretative choices, and in this way practice is presented as a method of judging the value and relevance of analytical and research findings to future acts of practice.

1.4 Practice-led research

Closest to my own working method, ‘practice-led’ research encompasses investigation in which the unique concerns of practice and practitioners form the basis of analysis and research. As already mentioned, this type of investigation is different from some examples of practice-as-research as described above, due to research findings being presented separately from practice, usually in the form of written text.

Practice-led research is also frequently carried out by practitioners themselves, and based on practitioners' own experiences as performing artists; this is distinct from the examples of practice-based research discussed above, which often stem from the analysis of the recordings or performances of others.

In the following section, I summarise some examples of what I consider to be practice-led research, including studies that take into account the role of the instrument, the physical nature of practice, and the 'liveness' of performance. I return to some of these aspects of research in Part B, in which I describe my multiple research methods.

Instrument-based research

What I have termed 'instrument-based' research refers to investigation that takes the physical act of playing an instrument as the starting point and the means of research. This differs from the study of physical gesture, as described above, since it relates more to the way certain aspects of the performance of a specific work physically *feel* to the performer, aspects of which may, or may not, be expressed in clear outward gestures. A prime example is Miné Doğantan-Dack's instrument-led research into the performance of the two *Arioso* sections from Beethoven's Sonata Op. 110, exploring in depth the physical sensation of contact with the instrument, including the 'feeling' of vertical and lateral movements across the keyboard. She explores how a performance direction such as *cantabile* is understood within an entire tradition of pedagogy, and how certain sensations and pianistic 'touches' have become associated with this direction. Through her investigation she suggests ways in which, for her, the physical sensation of performing this particular movement led to certain performance choices, for example in relation to tempo.

What Doğantan-Dack's discussion stems from is the way in which one might interpret Beethoven's markings in the score of the *Arioso dolente* from Op. 110, and the initial difficulty that she encountered regarding performance interpretation, some of which directly related to the physical sensation experienced when playing the work.

What she suggests is that:

one ultimately needs to resort to one's own affective experiences and representations, be they aural, visual, tactile, kinaesthetic or multi-modal, to give meaning to such terms in performance. Convincing artistic results cannot come from outwardly following certain learned rules and prescriptions alone (2015, p. 190).

This notion is one that I whole-heartedly relate to, and is central to my interpretations regarding my performance of Scriabin's Sonata No. 6. Whilst I am not suggesting that the physical sensation of playing a particular work is the only way of approaching practice-led research, the relevance of the physical aspects of practice should not be discounted as they lead to an understanding of the 'physical identity' of the work; we gain a unique and crucial knowledge of the work through playing it at the piano which is not obtainable via any other means.¹⁶

Rink has also presented similar ideas to Doğantan-Dack and addressed what he perceives as the need for new modes of presentation when investigating what we may learn from the physical aspects of practice. He attempts an analysis in which he uses diagrams of the keyboard itself to demonstrate how the work is laid out on the keyboard, and examines how an understanding of the way this is manifested in the physical traversal of the keyboard may also relate to other aspects of the work – such as our perception of phrase structure – as well as considering how the way it feels to play a work may relate to the way we understand and interpret a work analytically

¹⁶ Peter Hill advocates an antithetical approach, suggesting that the initial learning of a work should take place away from the instrument, using only an imagined performance, so as to avoid unhelpful habits and conceptions that may arise out of physical handling at too early a stage. Such an approach does not exclude the possibility that the physicality of performing that work will be addressed, but it eliminates it as fundamental to our, at least initial, perception of the work (Hill, 2002, pp. 129-143).

(2015, pp. 127-148). Similarly to Doğantan-Dack, Rink uses this method to analyse a short work – in his case a Chopin prelude – and one wonders how such an approach might work on a larger scale, and how such an undertaking would be effectively presented, due to the complexity and size of the required diagrammatic representation.

The 'liveness' of performance

Part of the process of building a performance interpretation, to which I have referred above, is undergone *in* the act of performance, and a unique consideration of certain practice-led research projects is the difficulty of capturing and describing the knowledge gained from the unpredictability of the 'liveness' of performance. Doğantan-Dack (2012) suggests that more musicological approaches – such as those referred to in section 1.2 – subject the study of performance to processes and ways of thinking which neglect key aspects of live performance, referring in particular to the experience of live, uninterrupted performance from the performer's perspective, and the process of learning that occurs on stage in the temporal act of performance.

The notion of knowledge created through practice is an important aspect of my own study – in particular the idea that research into the composer's life and the context of the work's conception can provide the underlying stimulus for the more spontaneous creation of interpretative ideas during live performance. An example of this may be illustrated through my own performances of Scriabin's Sonata No. 6, which I have continued to undertake throughout this study, performing the work at least five or six times since 2011. It was during a performance in the summer of 2015 that I came upon a new interpretative possibility, which I consider to be at once a result of the unpredictable nature of live performance as well as rooted in my research into the

work.

The research backdrop to this performance was my on-going speculation that Scriabin symbolises philosophical characters from the *Prefatory Act* text through musical means, and in particular through the connection of particular melodic and harmonic material with certain descriptive characteristics. I argue in the following chapters for such a connection between the characters of the Masculine and Feminine Principles – as found in the text of the *Prefatory Act* – and certain melodic and rhythmic features of the Sixth Sonata, the masculine relating to active, energised music, the feminine to slower, more languid music. I currently uphold that one section of the music – bars 82-91 – alternates in a dialogue between the faster masculine figure and the slower feminine figure. At the time of my performance in 2015 I had a somewhat different interpretative concept of this passage, considering the fast and slow configurations to be more closely connected and integrated in character. During the performance, I suddenly realised that it was possible to draw a similarity between this passage and the short exchanges of dialogue between the Masculine and Feminine Principles, as found towards the beginning of Scriabin's text. This realisation was partly stimulated by my spontaneous decision in this particular performance to linger more over the slower phrases, which in turn led me to consider at that moment that this passage could be performed in the manner of a dialogue. I will return to this particular interpretation in Chapters 5 and 6, in which I will argue further that the research undertaken was leading to this special moment that came about during live performance; despite happening in the moment of performance, the seeds of this interpretative shift had already been sown during the process of performance preparation.

Research into this real-time experience of performance, as experienced by the

performer, is presented by Doğantan-Dack in her 2008 project *Alchemy in the spotlight: Qualitative transformations in chamber Music performance*, summarised as follows:

The Alchemy Project aims to represent performances and performers within the disciplinary discourse in their own terms, by articulating the characteristics of the practice of performing live on stage, where performers make performances within a temporal environment that is bound up both with the logic of indeterminacy and the necessity of uninterrupted flow (Doğantan-Dack 2008).

Whilst she suggests that performance itself cannot be called research without a following process of self-reflection, which in turn feeds back into practice, the formal presentation of her work takes on many forms, including workshops, concerts and recordings.

A noticeable aspect of both Doğantan-Dack's and Rink's studies – as summarised above – is that they both stem from their first-person experience as performing artists, which also forms the vital basis of my own research. In this respect an important distinction may be made between this experience-based research, and research which is based on live performances or recordings of other musicians – such as is found in practice-based research, as summarised in section 1.2 – in which, it may be argued, the researcher is further removed from the tactile aspects of practice, the more unpredictable and spontaneous qualities of live performance, as well as the on-going processes of performative interpretation.

By placing myself as a performing artist at the centre of my study, my work is perhaps comparable to autoethnographic studies – such as the work of conductor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2009) – although my research differs with regard to the nature of the written material, which in the case of Bartleet employs far greater narrative description of her experiences as a conductor, before drawing out those threads of most significance. I would argue that research of a more autoethnographic nature still retains great value as it highlights aspects of personal artistic interpretative practice

from which the instigator of the research and others may learn, as Davidson comments: 'For Bartleet, the highly personal but detailed account of her own practice offered insights to develop her conducting: processes of reflecting and writing were influential in shaping her future practice.' (Davidson, 2015, p. 99). Similarly, through examining the on-going processes and relationships present in my research and practice, I hope to shed some light on the ways in which both, at certain times, assume a leading role in the development of a performance interpretation. My main aim has been to present the process I have undergone, rather than putting forward a definitive interpretation – although I certainly hope that my resulting performance is convincing and effective – and crucially I hope my research conclusions will stimulate further discourse, regardless of whether they are universally shared.

Part B:

1.5 Multiple methodologies

In this section, I explain in greater detail some of the multiple methods I have employed in my research, which in part has been an examination and reflection on the complex process of performative interpretation, particularly with regard to how knowledge is gained and assimilated through research, analysis and practice. My methods include score-based analysis tailored to the unique concerns of practice, as well as research into the historical and biographical context of the Sixth Sonata – with particular focus given to the connection I discern between the sonata and the libretto of the unfinished *Prefatory Act*, and the way this link may be made manifest in practice through musical characterisation. Practice is used throughout as a means of critically reflecting and judging the relevance and validity of analytical and research conclusions. In addition, practice itself has been used as a method of generating new

knowledge through the act of live performance, in which new interpretative concepts have been formed through practice. I also discuss in this section some of the assumptions that have been made regarding the notion of musical structure, and explain how I presently understand this term in relation to notions of changing musical character.

The role of the score, and score-based analysis:

In the following section I discuss how perceptions of the score, as a focal point of music analysis, have possibly contributed to the notion that analysis precedes practice, and the relegation of practice to a position of lesser importance. I comment on how this may stem from the perception of the score as a document through which – via a process of rigorous analysis – may be revealed some deeper, fundamental knowledge, and present some more contemporary, practice-led views which question such a concept. I go on to argue that a more viable way of approaching analysis – from a practice-led perspective – is one which acknowledges that analytical conclusions are dependent on and judged through practice, and that the myriad performance possibilities which live performance can afford may lead to an array of analytical possibilities. In this respect, I argue that to be useful in practice, analysis must be tailored to the unique needs of the performer, and suggest that practice may be used as a means of judging the validity of analytical thought, as well as a means of generating new interpretative possibilities.

The score has inevitably been an important document throughout my study of the Sixth Sonata, and has frequently provided the starting point for analysis, research and practice; the connections I have made between Scriabin's philosophy and the music have stemmed from my analysis of harmonic and melodic patterns, as well as the performance indications that are found throughout. However, this represents only

one aspect of my interpretative process, the act of live performance playing a crucial role, as already discussed in section 1.4. In this respect, the score has only provided a starting point for interpretation, and represents only part of a process that has the potential to produce a plurality of results.

In more traditional, musicological approaches, the score has been regarded quite differently. The work of theorist Heinrich Schenker has been among the most lastingly influential in music analysis; Schenker wrote the following in 1911 in relation to the ontological status of a musical work:

Basically, a composition does not require a performance in order to exist ... the reading of a score is sufficient to prove the existence of the composition. The mechanical realisation of the work of art can thus be considered superfluous. Once a performance does take place, one must realise that thereby new elements are added to a complete work of art: the nature of the instrument that is being played; properties of the hall, the room, the audience; the mood of the performer, technique, et cetera. Now if the composition is to be inviolate, kept as it was prior to the performance, it must not be compromised by these elements ... (Schenker 1911, translated 2000 by Schott).

Schenker's notion that performance is in some way 'superfluous' to the existence of a work of art is striking, and more than a little contentious. He is in part referring to what he perceives as 'bad' performances; however, the notion that some sort of musical 'truth' ultimately resides in the score – without need for performance – remains. What becomes apparent, when scanning the literature relating to music theory, analysis and performance, is that such a concept of the musical score (commonplace in the 1950's and 60's, and still in existence) has been partly responsible for the gulf separating music analysis and the art of performance.¹⁷

Many practitioners of and commentators on practice-led research have been critical of older models of analysis and research, especially those that have neglected practice or presented it as separate from, or even secondary to, the act of research,

¹⁷ This is perhaps epitomised by the likes of Schenker, who frequently refers to notions of 'truth', with respect to musical works and their understanding and rendition. See, for instance, 'The Art of Performance' (Schenker, 1911).

theory and analysis. Nicholas Cook and others, including John Rink, Joel Lester and Roy Howat, criticise the idea promoted by some theorists – such as Wallace Berry and Eugene Narmour – that formal score analysis should come first, and is to be later ‘interpreted’, or ‘translated’, into performance – a ‘page-to-stage’ approach; Cook is particularly critical of Narmour’s claim that analysis may be used to judge ‘objectively that ... certain performances are subtly though demonstrably better than others’ (Narmour, 1988, pp. 317-340).

I share Cook’s criticism of this hierarchical separation between score-based analysis and performance and find Narmour’s contention that analysis enables an ‘objective’ judgment of the value of one performance over another to be problematic; judgments may be objective as far as a predefined theory is concerned, but judgment of any performance inevitably causes one to employ one’s own notion of which values constitute a convincing musical experience. Furthermore, the singular nature of such an approach to analysis seems at odds with the plurality of musical performance; each time I perform the Sixth Sonata, or any work for that matter, I am performing from the same score, however the resultant performance is different each time. In this respect, I would suggest that it is possible that different outcomes in practice may lead to different analytical conclusions, and in this regard it seems problematic to separate analysis from the sound and experience of practice.

The plurality of performance stems from the limitations of the score, which cannot possibly account for the precise nuance and timing of every note in performance, nor for the varying interpretative decisions of performers. In this respect the score is incomplete and requires a further act of practical interpretation in which the performer decides how to most effectively and convincingly realise the music as sound, as Howat suggests:

What we can interpret – indeed, can only interpret – is its [music's] notation. Since notation ... ‘partitions’ music ... it cannot avoid distorting it, and our task is to ‘read back through’ the distortions on paper, employing aural and visual awareness, skill and sensitivity.

And:

Although scores are the most fixed point of reference for our classical repertoire, far from being absolutes they rest on sand, and what we scientifically trust least, our musical feeling, remains the strongest and final link to what the composer sensed and heard before subjecting it to notation.

...
Notation ... can only follow in music's footsteps, mapping where and how inspiration has passed (1995, p. 3).

Joel Lester considers the score in similar terms, stating that ‘musical scores are not so much the piece itself as a map of the piece or a recipe for producing it ... a musical work exists beyond its score’¹⁸ (1995 p.199) and in similar fashion, José A. Bowen suggests that ‘the score is an attempt to define the boundaries for future performances ... [it] is a spatial representation of only some of the elements of the temporal phenomena we call music’ (1999, p. 425).¹⁹

Despite the level of detail and specificity in some scores, as well as the acclaim afforded the latest ‘Urtext’ editions, the ‘field of performances’²⁰ remains infinitely large; there exists an endless number of possible further interpreters and ‘creators’ of the work, who in turn will ‘create’ the work differently each time it is performed.²¹ Bowen (1999) suggests that the reluctance of musicologists to incorporate the study of performance into their work stems from these ‘variable aspects’ of performance, musicologists preferring to take as their focus the fixed and finite score. It is perhaps then the vast scope for variation in the performance-related environment that leads

¹⁸ See also Godlovitch (1998, pp. 85-87).

¹⁹ See also Cook (1987, p.227).

²⁰ Lawrence Rosenwald suggests that a piece exists ‘in the relation between its notation and the field of its performances’ (1993, p. 62).

²¹ A point illustrated by Brahms, who allegedly challenged a critic as to where in the score it instructed that the music always had to be performed in the same way (Howat, 1995, p. 4). See also Boorman (1999, p. 404).

the likes of Berry and Narmour – who in fact set out to write about analysis *and* performance – to attempt to narrow down the potential ‘field of performances’ to an almost singular, more ‘objective’ performance choice.²²

The methodology which I have employed with regard to the score is one in which the processes of analysis, practice and research are far more integrated; analytical insight not only stemming from the score but also from the act of practice itself. In my present study, the score has been employed as an initial basis for interpretation, and whilst I have returned to the score throughout, it is only one tool used in a process which is able to generate a variety of interpretative possibilities, some of which may be formed through the more unpredictable spontaneity of live performance. The following judgment of, and reflection on the success of these performative interpretations – as well as their correspondence to analysis and research – deepens the understanding of the range of performative and analytical possibilities within the work. In order to better demonstrate the relationship between my performative and analytical interpretations, I provide audio examples so as to maintain focus on the *sound* of the music in practice.²³ Such audio examples will partly rely on the reader/listener perceiving the same qualities as me in that particular performance, as well as understanding the reasoning behind my judgement. Whilst audio examples may help to support my argument, I recognise that such recorded examples only document a single performance, and may not capture the same qualities and experience of a ‘live’ performance; they are instead a *documentation* of live performances.²⁴

²² Contrary to this Schmalfeldt insists that “*there is no single, one-and-only performance decision that can be dictated by an analytic observation*” (1985, p.28).

²³ Nelson advocates such a method of presentation suggesting that in his experience ‘practice is characteristically submitted as substantial evidence of the research inquiry’ (2013, p. 40).

²⁴ For more see Rye (2003, pp. 115).

Practice as a research method and its role in analysis

In my own work, processes of research and analysis are guided by the act of practice, creating a two-way flow between research and performance, as described above. In the following section, I discuss the notion that performers can't help but analyse the music they play in some form, and that this process is both intellectual and emotional. I go on to discuss in more detail my own working method of practice-led analysis and research, considering the place of practice in this process as a means of making artistic judgments, generating new interpretative ideas, and as part of an on-going process of self-reflection.

I have long held the belief that performers of musical works cannot help but analyse in the process of performance preparation. Whilst this process may involve score-based analysis, it may also include analysis and judgement of practice itself through a process of analytical and critical listening; this process is not necessarily documented but is one that is on-going, evolving from one performance to another.²⁵ The less formal nature of this process is likely to call, initially at least, on more intuitive responses in which we use our emerging 'feeling' about the work – to use Howat's term – as a method of artistic judgement. I define the term 'feeling' here as referring to a personal, changing and emergent emotional understanding of the music, which is intrinsically tied to my intellectual comprehension of the work; the act of practice engaging both the performer's intellect and emotions in a process in which analysis may be used to understand a particular emotional response, or may lead the performer to reconsider their, perhaps initially intuitive, emotional reaction.²⁶

²⁵ Similarly, Rink suggests that '[p]erformers are continually engaged in a process of "analysis", only ... of a kind different from that employed in published analyses. The former sort of "analysis" is not some independent procedure *applied* to the act of interpretation: on the contrary, it forms an integral part of the performing process' (1990, p. 323).

²⁶ Ingemar Fridell similarly suggests that '... music comprises an emotional side as well as an intellectual side, both these aspects ought to be respected in a balanced way when performing a

Whilst it is theoretically possible to arrive at a performance interpretation without any formal analytical process, for me, analysis – both of the score and of my own performances – is an inevitable and natural part of performance practice; this idea is displayed in the following quotes from several notable musicians.²⁷ Alfred Brendel describes the following when first playing a work:

I read the notes, I play as I do so, and listen as naively as possible. I am patient. I pay as much attention to the details as to the whole. They bring each other mutually to life, they need each other, presuppose each other. One can have the right idea about a detail, but it will disturb if it does not relate to the whole in the correct proportion (2001, p.183).

This describes a process of analysis not uncommon in score-based formal analysis – that of considering smaller details in relation to a larger whole.²⁸ What Brendel is describing though is more than that; it is a process of analysis that involves *playing* and *listening*, and that takes place *at the instrument*.²⁹ Daniel Barenboim also alludes to a process of analysis:

When I read or play a score for the first time, there is no objective possibility of having either familiarity or an intellectual understanding of the piece; the initial reaction is exclusively instinctive, the result of a first impression. ... After this initial contact then, I can proceed to an analysis of the piece, work on it, think about it, turn it upside down and, in doing so, acquire far more knowledge of the music than I had upon the original reading of it. (2008, pp. 57-58).

The resulting knowledge acquired is perhaps similar to Rink's notion of 'informed intuition' (1990, p. 328), and is relatable to Bowen's statement regarding the performer as a communicator of 'the work and individual expression' (1999, p. 425) – intuition is related more to our 'feeling' about the work, which is then understood, informed, and questioned by our increasing analytical knowledge of the work. Such a process is

composition' (2009, p. 4).

²⁷ Meyer also claims that '[a]nalysis is implicit in what the performer does ...' and that 'such analysis may have been intuitive and unsystematic.' (1973, p.29). Rink suggests a similar notion, going as far to state that 'performers often understand music along the same lines as those carrying out 'rigorous analysis', but in different terms – a parallelism that we ignore at our peril' (2002, p. 39).

²⁸ A similar notion is displayed by such performers as Edwin Fischer (1951, p. 21), and Barenboim (2008, p. 58).

²⁹ Of relevance here is Bolt's suggestion that 'theorising out of practice is ... a very different way of thinking than applying theory to practice' (2007, p. 33).

displayed in Rink's analysis of Chopin's Nocturne Op. 27 no.1, in which his 'performer's analysis' begins with a subjective description of what he perceives as the changing moods of the music, before proceeding to a more in-depth study (2002, pp. 42-56).

A vital aspect of my own practice-led method is the use of practice as a means of critically judging analytical and musical thought; due to this process being carried out at the piano, practice has also generated new analytical and musical insights, partly through the immediacy with which new interpretative ideas can be tried out, through having the sound of the music ever-present, and through the on-going physical experience of performing the work. All of these processes employ what I have termed *analytical listening* in which music is analysed *through* the act of practice; this process can be continually repeated, the resulting 'performance' undergoing judgement and critical self-reflection each time. A similar process of on-going artistic judgement is beautifully captured by Gerald Moore, who describes in great detail the process undergone in working on the opening bars of Schubert's *Wanderers Nachtlied* at the piano:

Each chord though related and joined to its neighbour is a different weight, differing by no more than a feather. You listen self-critically as you practise it. You experiment. ... All this is the most fascinating pursuit imaginable. In your search for light and shade you are as happy and absorbed as a painter mixing the colours on his palette ... (1962, pp. 197-8).

This is a perfect example of repeated analytical listening. As I have already alluded to, Moore's idea that we 'experiment' suggests that through this on-going process we have the potential to reach a deeper understanding of how to most effectively realise the score as sound. In the same chapter, Moore describes in detail how the same musical passage is tried out in a myriad of different ways – without enough dynamic shape, with too much dynamic shape etc. – each time his ears assessing the outcome as to what is most desirable, given the sound of the notes the composer has written,

as well as the subject matter of the song itself (*ibid*). This process is similar to what Rink terms ‘ongoing interrogation’ (2011, p. 283).³⁰

Furthermore, I would argue that a preference for a methodology which constantly engages with the act of practice draws out different, performative considerations, such as the effect of different tempi, articulation and dynamics, as well as the purely performative concern of the visual effect of physical gestures and movements – elements which seem at times to take a subsidiary role to those of harmony and melody in more ‘traditional’ analysis. Rink alludes to a similar notion and suggests that through taking the ‘fundamental aims and approaches implicit in performing a piece’ (1990, p. 321) as the premise for analysis of the work in question, we reveal through practice, ‘a range of musical parameters that typically are given short shrift by analysts but which have much to do with music as experienced ... by those performing it’ (2015, p. 130).

Besides a process of practice-led analysis, my work also encompasses processes of research into the historical and biographical background to the Sixth Sonata, and in particular the connection I discern between Scriabin’s unusual performance instructions and the libretto to the *Prefatory Act*; I argue throughout Chapters 2-5 that such a connection has been of great relevance to the on-going formation of my performative interpretation of Scriabin’s Sonata No. 6. My working method for connecting my research findings to practice have mainly stemmed from the notion that Scriabin’s performance instructions may be used to connect specific melodic and harmonic material to specific characters, as found in the *Prefatory Act*,

³⁰ Inevitably the initial approach to a work will vary from musician to musician, for instance Hill advocates a different approach, discussing the benefits he believes are gained through working away from the instrument – this may work for some but will be very much dependent on the working methods and processes of individual practitioners; his notion that such an approach may lead to a piece being memorised will certainly not be the case for everyone, myself included!

and that such musical material contains inherently similar qualities to these characters. I discuss my notion of character in music in greater detail in section 1.6; the process of connecting character to music has employed both analysis and practice – by way of analytical listening – in which I consider through practice how musical character may be portrayed through the manipulation of such devices as dynamic and rhythmic inflection, tempo, rubato, voicing, layering of textures, and physical gesture. I also consider in Chapter 6 how best to incorporate my research findings regarding Scriabin's philosophy – as expressed in the *Prefatory Act* – into performance presentation.

It must be made clear that I am not suggesting that the processes I have undergone are universal and I fully acknowledge that the processes and techniques employed in 'learning' a work vary from person to person, my work being but one example – in performance practice; there is no 'one size fits all' method, regarding such things as technique, expression, memorization, and analysis – however I hope that such work will stimulate further examination of these processes, from which practitioners and analysts may learn more about their own methods. My study of Scriabin's Sixth Sonata is on-going and results are constantly emergent and based in first-person experience; my conclusions from this current study as to the relationship between research, analysis and performance will continue to change and emerge long after the study is published, such is the nature of musical performance and interpretation, and it is not my intention to suggest a definitive understanding, not that I believe such a thing exists in the first place.

The basis of my study in my own experience as a performing musician means that the knowledge gained has a greater fluidity due to it being based on subjective deduction, judgement, and perception, in addition to certain verifiable facts. What I am

essentially hoping to achieve is a personally perceived and convincing alignment of the work in practice, with analytical thought and my research findings related to the work and its historical and biographical context;³¹ this is not a process of research first, and then transfer to performance later, but rather it is the gathering of a vast array of information pertaining to the subject, whilst also using practice as a means of generating new interpretative possibilities, and then of critically judging the relevance and potential usefulness of the research findings to performance. Such an approach attempts to lift the focus from music's notation in score form – without disregard to what the composer has included – to its array of potential and possible temporal realisations.³² In this way I wish to echo Lester when he suggests that through such an approach 'performers could enter into analytical dialogue as *performers* – as artistic/intellectual equals, not as intellectual inferiors who needed to learn from theorists' (1995, p. 214).

1.6 Some assumptions guiding the research process: musical structure and creation of narrative and programme

In the following section, I discuss how a preoccupation with communicating musical structure formed the basis of my initial contact with Scriabin's Sonata No. 6 in practice; I then go on to examine notions of what constitutes musical structure, and in particular the suggestion that 'structure' is perceived as potential, plural and process

³¹ See also Cook (2001, p. 245) in which he describes this process as a 'collaboration' between performer and composer, and which takes place through the performer placing, hearing and understanding the work in question within a historical and biographical context, and through some form of practice-based analysis. It is this part of the process that I am most interested in – what form does this relationship between performance and research take on? How does this contextualising lead to a 'better' performance, and by what values do we make this judgement?

³² This echoes Rink's following summing up of such a process: '... analysis of music need not and indeed should not be undertaken exclusively or even primarily with regard to its notational representation ... but on the basis of how the music is enacted and effected over time' (2015, p. 130).

in relation to my own methodology. In doing so I discuss my own perception of structure as relating to a sense of musical narrative consisting of changing character, expressed through such musical phenomena as dynamics, rhythm and texture as well as, and not just exclusively to, harmonic and melodic patterns. I go on to discuss the notion that structure may be best understood, particularly with regard to Scriabin's Sixth Sonata, in relation to changing musical character, mood and emotion, and how this relates to the processes of research and practice in the context of my current study.

During the time of this research project my understanding of musical structure and its importance in forming a performative interpretation has continued to evolve. My two recordings (2009 and 2015) display very different qualities – particularly with regard to tempo and dynamics – and I would argue that this is largely due to the knowledge of this work that I have acquired in the interim period, and in the resulting shift that has occurred with regard to my own notions of structure. During my early performances of Sonata No. 6, between 2005 and 2009, much of my preparation had been focused on trying to ensure the structure of the work was clearly perceived by the listener in performance.

The reasons for this emphasis was partly due to my concern that the listener may feel lost, and that structural clarity would help prevent this, but also stemmed from my experience of listening to John Ogdon's recording of the work (1971) – the first recording that I bought of Sonata No. 6 in 2006. Despite some familiarity with the work due to several months of intermittent practice, I found it near impossible to follow the score in certain sections, and found myself becoming lost.³³ My sense that the listener must not feel disorientated within the structure of the Sixth Sonata was further

³³ I would like to add that many of Ogdon's Scriabin recordings are extremely impressive, and it seems Sonata No. 6 was something of an exception.

compounded by my participation in a Masterclass in 2006 with an eminent pianist, who openly admitted to having very little to offer in way of advice due to their struggle in understanding or making sense of the music.

In my attempt to exaggerate, and therefore make audibly clear, ‘the structure’ of the sonata, the earlier recording has far more extreme, and unwritten changes in dynamics and tempo – one such instance occurring in the second subject area of the exposition, in which a faster rising figure emerges which is based on a slower rising melodic figure which forms the beginning of the second subject. In the earlier recording, I remember trying to create the effect of the music gradually evolving into this faster, rising figuration by exaggerating the forward momentum of the music, resulting in a quickening of tempo and an increase in dynamic. My most recent recording is very different, allowing the music to unfold of its own accord, trusting Scriabin’s dynamic markings, the aim being to create the effect of a sort of dream-like intoxication; each repetition of the same melodic figure becomes more seductive and intimate, rather than energised. The reason for this shift lies in my interpretation of the character of this section, due largely to my on-going research, but also from a re-evaluation of the desire to communicate ‘structure’, as well as how this may be achieved.

Notions of musical structure occupy performers and analysts alike; part of the reason for my preoccupation with structure during my earlier recording stems from the pedagogical importance given to structure during my time as an undergraduate pianist. A fixation on analytically ascertainable structure also forms the basis of much musicological and analytical writing, and in particular ‘structuralist’ score-based analysis.³⁴ Such work frequently approaches the notion of musical structure as

³⁴ For a number of examples see *Rethinking Contemporary Music Theory* (McCreless, 1997, pp. 13-53).

fundamental and predefined, and is encapsulated by Charles Burkhart's description of structure as being 'the framework on which the music is composed' (1973, pp. 82-85), and his assertion that 'if the framework is accurately perceived, it can illumine the myriad compositional details based upon it' (*ibid*). Such a perception of structure is based on score, notation and compositional process and is an example of what I term *compositional* structure. Inevitably, the notion that one comes across in such cases is of structure as singular rather than plural; that a fundamental, 'hidden' structure can be revealed through methods based on such techniques as those expounded in Schenkerian and set-class theory.³⁵ Analysis that proceeds from this vantage point is frequently undertaken without consideration for the different structural and temporal proportions which different performances may display, for instance the relative length of different sections may change depending on the tempo choices taken, which in turn may change the way we experience the work as a listener. In this respect I make a further distinction between *compositional* structure – as *seen* on the page – and *performative* structure as *heard*, and which is pluralistic due to the nature of live performance.

What Burkhart's concept of structure neglects then, and what criticism by Rink, Lester and others alludes to, is the integral relationship between music and time; in particular the temporal, and therefore changeable nature of musical structure as heard from one performance to another, resulting in the potential for multiple structures, in which structure is conceived as fluid, rather than rigid.³⁶ This concept is one which has been expounded much by Rink, suggesting that 'musical materials do not themselves

³⁵ For examples see Baker (1986, 1997), Wai-ling (1993, 1996) and Perlé (1984). Lester is critical of this type of approach to analysis, calling for a re-evaluation of the focus from 'finding "the" structure of a piece to defining multiple strategies for interpreting pieces' (Lester, 1995, p. 214).

³⁶ For a detailed exploration of music as it exists in time, see *Musical Time: The Sense of Order* (Barry, 1990).

constitute structure(s): they *afford* the inference of structural relationships' (2015, p.129), meaning that there is a range of potential structural relationships inherent in a musical work. Rink continues to state that the inference of such relationships will be unique each time this process is carried out – i.e. each time the work is performed – and suggests that 'musical structure should therefore be seen as constructed, not immanent; as pluralistic, not singular ... [and] understood as process, not as "architecture"' (*ibid*).³⁷

Whilst I agree with much of Rink's discussion of the multitude of potential structures music can afford, his following analytical presentation of a Chopin Prelude highlights the difficulty of representing such a notion on paper, the problem being that by representing structure diagrammatically, we inevitably fix it in a singular way. Rink's method uses rhythmic values to represent his perceived phrase structure, fixing the proportions of the phrases, so that a phrase represented by a crotchet is seemingly exactly half the length of a phrase represented by a minim. In the temporal environment of performance this may not be the case; the 'crotchet' phrase could in fact be just as long as the 'minim' phrase, if the performer chooses to manipulate the tempo in such fashion. In many ways this is an example of diagrammatic limitations, such diagrams representing the possible compositional layout, frequently devoid of time, rather than the potential plurality of musical structure and the effect that different structures might afford. Rink recognises this problem, as well as referring to it in an earlier commentary on the relationship between analysis and performance, suggesting that '[d]iagrams of this sort have no more musical value than an electrical circuit board unless one understands their architectural attributes in diachronic terms, that is, in

³⁷ Rink, in *Analysis and (or?) performance*, also sometimes refers to 'shaping' rather than 'structure', as he feels the word 'shaping' better reflects music's temporal qualities (2002).

terms of time and process' (Rink, 2002, p. 45). Such representations are almost unavoidable if we try and present structure diagrammatically; if we do attempt to do so, then further explanation and understanding of its limitations is necessary.

In my present view, the elevation of musical structure as a fundamental aspect of how music is received, heard and understood, and the resulting desire for its conveyance in performance, is frequently overemphasised. In the realm of practice, this stems from making assumptions with regard to how the listener hears and receives the music we play. Whilst it is not the intention of this study to investigate the complex relationship between audience and artist, my own performance preparation is carried out with the communication of the expressiveness of the music to the audience constantly in mind. In this respect, the current study considers the processes undergone in choosing how and what musical phenomena to manipulate, in reaction to my own, personal perception of what constitutes the expressive identity of a work – which may include structure but which may also include concepts such as character, drama, tension, even a projected programme, some of which may be drawn from research into the origins of the work in question. This echoes ideas put forward by Shaffer, who suggests – as does Rink (1990), Schmalfeldt (1985), and Dunsby (1989) – that it is not correct to define performance in terms of just the articulation of musical structures, but that

... the shaping of musical expression and the choice of expressive features – timing, dynamics, timbre, and articulation – is a function of the musical character, and is, at least partly, created by the performer. The concept of an underlying narrative takes the study of musical expression beyond recent studies that relate expression only to local properties of music structure ... (Shaffer, 1992, 265).

It is in this context of performative structure as comparable to narrative that I would like to present my own concepts of structure, which I have employed in this current study. As I have already alluded to, my understanding of structure lies in the notion that concepts of structure can be split into two categories: compositional structure and

performative structure. These are not necessarily unrelated; however, an understanding of compositional structure will require further performative interpretation in order to become relevant to practice. I have approached performative structure as a process of changing character and mood, the basis of this notion being that this is how I, as a listener, most commonly perceive the music I hear. I have also used the descriptive nature of character and mood as a way of connecting the characters of the *Prefatory Act* to melodic and harmonic materials that I perceive as sharing similar qualities. Through this method of connecting research with practice, I have come to understand the performative structure of the Sixth Sonata as sharing similar narrative qualities with the *Prefatory Act*. Furthermore, the character that I discern as being inherent in certain musical patterns has been used as a basis for practice, in which I have experimented with how to most effectively express character through such performative means as the manipulation of dynamic and rhythmic inflection, phrasing, tempo, dynamic and voicing.³⁸ My understanding of the notion of performative structure as a process of changing character and mood is perhaps similar to Rink's suggestion that 'a sense of form-as-process is what really matters to the performer' (2002, p. 46).

Music and Character: Scriabin's performance descriptions

I have already described my methodology with regard to musical character in Scriabin's Sonata No. 6, and how I have used the descriptive nature of character and mood as a way of connecting research to practice, and of establishing the basis of my

³⁸ Clarke (1995, pp. 21-54) advocates a semiotic exploration of musical expression and similarly suggests a more all-inclusive understanding of the expressive effect of the manipulation of different musical phenomena – such as tempo, dynamic and articulation – and the different effect these manipulations have in different harmonic, melodic and structural contexts. Whilst the focus of Clarke's work is very much structure-centric – something of which he is self-critical – the consideration given to the expressiveness of a range of musical phenomena is similar to my own work.

concept of performative structure in this work. In the following section I expand this notion further within the available literature regarding music as narrative, and offer some brief examples of how I have used character as an interpretative tool in relation to Scriabin's performance descriptions, a fuller description of which forms the basis of Chapter 5.

It is common to describe music in terms of adverbs and adjectives, whether by way of response, in pedagogy, or within our own practice: an example of the former and latter is presented by Rink in his 'performer's analysis' of Chopin's Nocturne Op. 27 no. 1, his analysis preceded by a description of what he perceives to be the changing moods of the music (2002, pp. 42-45). He uses words such as 'bleakly', 'triumphant', 'cathartic', 'futile' and 'hopeful', all of which not only relate to a personal understanding, but also to a particular performance interpretation of the work. The same perception of the Nocturne may not be shared by all, but such descriptions are not seemingly at odds with the sound of the music within each section; such descriptions are likely to fall within certain interpretative parameters.³⁹

A similar link between such descriptions of character and musical structures is fostered by Schmalfeldt, who advocates the 'need to find the character of the work within its structure' (1985, pp. 17-18), focussing on the character and drama that she perceives as inherent in musical structures. Whilst others – such as Clarke – have questioned such an approach, suggesting that notions of character and drama don't necessarily always comply with concepts of structure in the more conventional sense (1995, pp.21-54), I share Schmalfeldt's view and would further advocate that notions of character, mood, atmosphere and drama may be far closer to the way many of us receive music.⁴⁰ Similar to Rink's initial, quasi-programmatic portrayal of Chopin's

³⁹ See Cook (2007, pp. 213-240).

⁴⁰ In his essay *Musical form and the listener*, Cook discusses an experiment that was carried out to

Nocturne, descriptions of prolonged, changing or dramatically contrasting character and mood may be a most effective means of describing the audibility of musical structure, and are therefore intrinsically linked to and determined by practice.⁴¹

My notion of musical character – or of music being potentially expressive of character – is based on the preconception that certain musical patterns infer, or are inherently expressive of, certain qualities, and – crucially – that music is expressive of these attributes through convincing performance. The significant and vital role of performance in this process is discussed by Doğantan-Dack (2014), who suggests that a work which has a widely accepted notion of character, could be performed in an entirely opposite, yet convincing manner, proposing by way of example the idea of performing Bartok's *Allegro Barbaro* with a gentle, expressive quality. Whilst this takes the role of performance to the extreme, and I would argue that such a rendition would be contrary to the character inherent in the music, it nonetheless highlights the extent to which performance may influence the expressive qualities of the music. The implications of such a re-evaluation of musical expression is a widening of performance possibilities, as well as greater focus on the performer as regards creating musical expression. Doğantan-Dack suggests that:

Precisely because the expressive potential of a composition cannot be known except through convincing performances of it, it is superfluous to speak of the expressive potential or meaning of musical structures in the abstract (2014).

What must surely follow is the suggestion that a composer's notion of their music expressing something may be based on similar such preconceptions as to music's expressive nature, meaning that the suggestion that Scriabin composed music with

investigate the perception of musical structure by listeners of Webern's *Symphony* (2007, pp.1-9). The results found that none of the participants picked up on Webern's use of palindrome, and very few picked up on the repeat of the opening section, instead responding by describing the music in terms of feelings, sensations and emotions, such as the increasing of tension, and so on.

⁴¹ A similar idea is recounted in an anecdote by Peter Hill regarding his time spent studying with Messiaen: 'for Messiaen, the performer's job was to infer meaning and 'character' from what was written in the score' (Hill, 2002, p. 132).

certain characteristics in mind, can be more broadly viewed within the context of other music with similarly perceived characteristics. For instance, the notion that the second subject area of the Sixth Sonata may have been composed with a feminine character in mind is understood within the context of what constitutes such a character for Scriabin, as well as possibly other prior perceptions of femininity as expressed in musical terms – see Chapter 5.6. In addition, we may also consider how such representations and perceptions of what constitutes a feminine character relate to current-day notions of gender perception, as I explore in Chapter 3.2.

The decision that certain performance choices are more appropriate to Scriabin's notion of femininity than others, should also be understood in this context, and the consequences of Doğantan-Dack's above notion are not that we should abandon the idea that certain characterisations may be more potentially inherent in a work than others, but that we should understand this notion within a historical-cultural context and – crucially – that '... such content cannot be known except through the mediation of first-person feelings' (Doğantan-Dack, 2014).

Music and Narrative

In this current study I use concepts of character and narrative as a way of generating performative interpretation, which may or may not be perceived as such by the listener. My sense of 'narrative' in the Sixth Sonata is based on the narrative commonalities I perceive between Scriabin's performance instructions and the philosophy and 'story' of the *Prefatory Act*, in which I connect the characteristics of certain characters in the text – such as the Masculine and Feminine Principles – with melodic and harmonic patterns that display what I perceive as inherently similar

qualities.⁴² I have already mentioned one such example in section 1.4 with regard to the possible musical dialogue I perceive in bars 82-91 between the alternating of slow and fast figurations, an interpretation which was first formed in live performance and which is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

Notions of plot in Scriabin's Sonatas have been suggested by Susanna Garcia (2000) and Kenneth Smith (2005). Garcia suggests that from the Sixth Sonata onwards it is possible to interpret each Sonata as representing a 'symbolist plot-archetype', based on their common structural features. Smith uses the text accompanying the Fourth Piano Sonata to suggest how Scriabin's poem may be interpreted as manifest in the music.⁴³ Both take Scriabin's own text as found in, and accompanying the scores as a starting point for their own interpretative suggestions. In a similar manner I have used Scriabin's text in the Sixth Sonata as a means of forming connections between the music and the 'story' of the *Prefatory Act*.

Fred Everett Maus has written at length regarding the application of literary narrative theory to music, and in particular as a means of approaching notions and analysis of musical structure, suggesting that a work may resemble narrative in as much as it may be made up of structural patterns, which may be understood as corresponding to characters within a 'story':

Musical events can be regarded as characters, or as gestures, assertions, responses, resolutions, goal-directed motions, references, and so on. Once they are so regarded, it is easy to regard successions of musical events as forming something like a story, in which these characters and actions go together to form something like a plot (1991, p. 6).

Maus describes a fundamental notion of narrative as inherent in musical patterns, on

⁴² Similarly, Anthony Newcomb encourages the interpretation of 'thematic units partly as characters in a narrative' (1984, pp. 234-237).

⁴³ Such interpretations are similar to more general descriptions of plot in relation to sonata-form, in which first and second subjects are recast as masculine and feminine 'characters', the development section representing a struggle, in which the masculine ultimately triumphs in the recapitulation, represented by the casting of the second subject material in the 'masculine' tonic key (McClary, 1991). For a further discussion of narrative and sonata-form, see Chapter 3, section 3.2.

both a macro and micro level. His approach differs to my own with regard to his focus on musical narrative from a listener's perspective, stating that '[l]isteners can hear musical successions as story-like because they can find something like actions, thoughts, and characters in music' (1991, p. 6).

Maus' notion is not without opposition. Clearly the idea that music is experienced or listened to as character, action, and narrative is unlikely to be universally true; people listen to different pieces of music in many diverse ways – one only need consult the literature regarding musical meaning to be convinced of this. Commentators such as Peter Kivy (2002) argue that absolute music is simply just sound events and patterns, capable of eliciting an emotional response, but not representative of emotion, narrative, plot or action. He goes on to argue that what ultimately moves us is music's aesthetic beauty. In a similar vein to my concepts of structure as changing character and mood, as presented in the previous section, he suggests that the emotive properties of music contribute to its structure. However, he is particularly critical of suggestions that music may be comparable to narrative, or relatable to certain plots or 'plot archetypes'; his argument stems from the idea that, though music may well be expressive of emotion, it simply does not contain the semantic properties required to form these detailed constructs (p.99).

Regarding absolute music, Kivy acknowledges that common musical notions such as call and response, question and answer, antecedent and consequent phrases are examples of a culturally-formed musical syntax (2002, p. 99), but suggests that this is not evidence for music possessing semantic content. Whilst it is not the focus of this study to discuss such philosophical questions at length, the process which I have undergone in the current study differs from Kivy's focus on how we *hear* music. I have used notions of character, emotion, dialogue, and plot as tools for forming a

performative interpretation. I would further argue that if we are able to establish, through research, that certain musical patterns may have been associated by the composer with certain characteristics or descriptive traits, and that we perceive these qualities as inherent in the musical material, then it may be possible to identify some similarities with such narrative devices as dialogue, and even plot. In this respect the music takes on quasi-programmatic properties, a form of music which Kivy treats very differently.

Music may not carry precise narrative facts, as does text, but at times contains enough in common to warrant the drawing of a comparison – music's suggestive and poetic nature leaving plenty of space for the listener, and performer, to form their own, more detailed, interpretative ideas. Furthermore, what seems more than evident to me, and which writers such as Kivy consistently neglect, is that regardless of whether we consider music to be expressive due to its aesthetic beauty or because of similarities with narrative or language, or in any other way for that matter, *performance* is central to this process. Musical meaning – similarly to analysis, as discussed earlier – is frequently presented and discussed as singular rather than pluralistic. This to me is illogical given the infinite number of potential performances and listeners for any work. There may be times when we simply marvel at how anyone could create something so beautiful, but there may also be instances when the musical material, as well as its performance, displays qualities which may be heard as similar to those found in language and narrative. My perception of narrative as inherent in certain musical features of Sonata No. 6 is but one possible understanding of the expressiveness of this composition; it is presented as part of a wider context of interpretative process.

My desire to make connotations between Scriabin's compositions and ideas

outside of the music stems from my curiosity and intrigue to understand better just what this music is potentially expressive of, so extraordinary are the sounds and harmonies that Scriabin conjures. I find it hard to accept that Scriabin didn't make some deeper spiritual connection between his music and philosophy. Kramer captures the ongoing and elusive nature of such a process, stating that:

Music is known by and valued for its “transcendence” of any specific meanings ascribed to it; identity seeks to become substance in music, even though music, being more event than substance, continually eludes this desire in the act of granting it’ (2002, p. 4).

In the following chapters I expand on my understanding of character in relation to Scriabin's libretto, and with regard to my perception that similar qualities of character are inherent in certain melodic and harmonic patterns. In Chapter 5 I discuss how the loose sense of plot that I perceive has become a possible means of understanding the extraordinary sounds which make up the music. In doing so I discuss how practice has been central to establishing and judging my constantly emergent performative interpretation, as well as how research has at times provided the stimulus for the formation of new interpretative possibilities in practice. My desire to communicate these ideas with my audience has led me to reconsider the most effective means of presentation, and in Chapter 6 I advocate for the lecture-recital as the most suitable mode of performance. Central to this process has been my research into Scriabin's *Prefatory Act* libretto, a summary of which is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

The *Prefatory Act* as a source of musical symbolism and as context for characterization in the Sixth Sonata

The philosophical backdrop to Scriabin's creative output from 1902 onwards lies in his emerging vision of an all-encompassing, world-changing work of art, known initially as the *Mysterium*, the musical prelude to which Scriabin came to refer to as the *Prefatory Act*.⁴⁴ The period from 1902 to his death in 1915 encompasses what is commonly considered to be Scriabin's 'middle' and 'late' periods of compositional style. Due to the absence of published compositions during 1909, his 'late' period is often considered to start in 1910. Though left unfinished upon his death in 1915, Scriabin planned the *Prefatory Act* to incorporate dance, colour projection, a chorus, soloists, smoke and scent, and with the *Mysterium* all present would experience a universal transfiguration onto a higher level of existence.

In the following three chapters, I outline and summarise the surviving content of this work, in view of the notion that much of its content may be relatable to Scriabin's piano music from the same period. I explore the ways in which aspects of the text may be interpreted as compositionally symbolised through certain characteristics of harmony, melody, and small and large-scale harmonic patterns in the composer's late style. My reasoning stems from the fact that during the period in which Scriabin was formulating his concept of the *Prefatory Act* and *Mysterium*, his music also underwent a considerable development, in particular moving away from more conventional systems of harmony to an original and unique approach to harmonic and melodic

⁴⁴ According to Scriabin's brother-in-law Boris de Schloezer, Scriabin first considered the idea of the *Mysterium* towards the end of 1902 whilst he was still engrossed in his plans for an opera (1953, pp. 177-290). It is worth noting that the term 'Mysterium' is a German translation of the original Russian meaning simply 'Mystery'.

patterns. Others, including Kenneth Smith (2010, 2013), Anna Gawboy (2010), Susanna Garcia (2000), as well as Leonid Sabaneev (1925, 1932) have made similar suggestions, and these will be considered below, as well as in the following chapters. More specifically, I argue for a possible connection between the *Prefatory Act* libretto and the descriptive markings Scriabin provides in his Sonata No.6, and explore how this connection may be made manifest and supported in and through practice.

2.1 The *Prefatory Act* and the late Sonatas

Scriabin left the *Prefatory Act* unfinished upon his death in 1915, leaving behind fifty pages of musical sketches, a very rough pencil drawing of the temple in which the work was to be performed, and a libretto, half of which was revised by Scriabin, constituting the most substantial surviving remnant of the work. An extremely dense and complex form of symbolism, it ultimately describes the journey of the active spirit from the purely spiritual, down through different spiritual levels of existence to the material world and embodiment – as represented by a human hero, who initiates the ascent of the universal spirit back to a higher level of spiritual oneness. Scriabin represents different aspects of this journey through a vast and varied collection of symbols, each with discernible characteristics and corresponding to different stages of existence: the Masculine and Feminine Principles, the Wave and the Light Beam, the human hero, as well as the Mountains and Fields, and the desert and wilderness.

Although Scriabin only started work in earnest on committing the text to paper in the winter of 1913, there is evidence to suggest that the concept and content of the *Mysterium* and *Prefatory Act* date from much earlier, as his brother-in-law Boris de Schloezer later explained:

[In] 1907-1908, he [Scriabin] formalised the content and the subject of the *Mysterium*, which he understood as a history of the races of man and of individual

consciousness or, more accurately, as an evolutionary psychology of the human races (1923, p. 68).

Some of the fundamental ideas behind the *Prefatory Act* text date back to as early as 1902 and to Scriabin's initial compositional plans for an opera, which was to contain comparable metaphysical themes – in particular the notion of a hero, destined, through struggle and sacrifice, to reveal to the world the path to spiritual unity. Scriabin composed portions of the libretto, as well as the musical material in the form of leitmotifs, but ultimately the opera would remain unfinished, making way for the grander, all-encompassing spiritual concept of the *Mysterium*.⁴⁵

Significantly, De Schloezer comments that 'from the inception of Scriabin's "mystical" period, in 1902, to the time of his death in April 1915, the outline of the *Mysterium* remained without significant change' (1923, p.178). The composition of the late Sonatas (numbers 6-10) occupied Scriabin from 1911-13 and, according to de Schloezer's statement, it could be argued that Scriabin may have already decided the fundamental themes and subject of the *Prefatory Act* well before commencing work on the Sixth Sonata (1911-12). The overlap between the composition of the late Sonatas, and the content of the *Prefatory Act* leads me to speculate that the music of the late period may be connected to some of the fundamental ideas of the text. Curiously, Scriabin's daughter Marina Scriabine strongly urges against such a literal connection:

... [the] philosophical foundation [of the *Mysterium* was] not connected with his music in subject matter or development, thematic content or comment, theory or realisation. They were parallel actions that enabled Scriabin to communicate the incomunicable (1987, p.8).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ De Schloezer comments that 'a phrase that Scriabin jotted down in 1903 as a leitmotiv of the opera found its way into the Sixth Piano Sonata, written in 1911' (1923, p. 175); sadly he does not recall which theme it was.

⁴⁶ It is possible that Marina Scriabine was trying to deflect attention away from Scriabin's philosophical musings, which have been considered by some to be to the detriment of his lasting reputation and legacy.

De Schloezer expresses a similar opinion regarding the parallelism of Scriabin's thought and music; however, he suggests that they are interconnected as they ultimately extend from the same source and 'are two facets of the same subject', but that one is not a 'transcription' of the other, suggesting both evolved autonomously and simultaneously (1923, p. 79-80). Crucially De Schloezer advocates that all of Scriabin's works 'were to him [Scriabin] but preliminary approaches to the *Mysterium*, a succession of approximations. It would be incongruous to examine his music and his philosophy separately' (p. 272). This to me is a clear indication that the late piano sonatas contain elements of the *Mysterium* and *Prefatory Act*, both musically and philosophically, as indicated by Scriabin's text throughout the scores, and that one may learn a great deal about the late sonatas through an examination of the *Prefatory Act* libretto, and gain an understanding of just what it was that Scriabin believed his art was capable of eliciting.

What De Schloezer argues is that Scriabin's musical evolution into his late style was not a musical translation of an already formed philosophical system; rather it was his belief in the potential power of *his* art that shaped his philosophy, in this respect it has always seemed logical to me that Scriabin himself would have established a connection between his music and philosophy, given the role that he intended music to play in initiating the transfiguration of the *Mysterium*.⁴⁷ Further evidence is provided by Leonid Sabaneev who suggests that Scriabin was 'a "leit-motifist" ... his leitmotifs are abstract mystical or philosophical concepts, conventionally expressed by themes' (1932, p. 206). Sabaneev's statement still fits within De Schloezer's notion of a musical-philosophical parallelism, but draws a more definite connection between them

⁴⁷ Sabaneev also suggested that '[t]hrough his [Scriabin's] music he desired to achieve certain purposes which lie outside the realm of music' (1931, p. 790).

by suggesting that Scriabin expresses mystical and philosophical concepts through musical themes in a quasi-Wagnerian manner.

Further exploration of Sabaneev's interpretation may help draw a connection between the Sixth Sonata and the symbols of the *Prefatory Act* text. Firstly, in the Sixth Sonata each new thematic idea is accompanied by a textual description in the score, possibly relating the music to certain characteristics that are very similar to those associated with specific symbols in the *Prefatory Act* text. Having examined each of these descriptions throughout Scriabin's late style, I wish to argue that musical similarities occur between texts alluding to similar characteristics. For instance the fast, rising figure which is heard in bar 82 of the Sixth Sonata, marked *avec entraînement* (with impulse, impulsive), is similar to the fast, falling figure heard in bar 69 of the Seventh Sonata, marked *très animé, ailé* (very animated, winged). In the *Prefatory Act* libretto, descriptions of impulsiveness, wingedness and animation are most frequently portrayed as characteristics of the Masculine Principle. In this way, I will argue in Chapters 3-5 that, despite the text not being committed to paper until late 1913, further evidence for the notion that Scriabin musically symbolises aspects of his philosophy prior to this date may be found through an examination of the music itself – in particular in relation to features of Scriabin's newly developed approach to harmony and melody, as well as aspects of musical structure.

Similar assertions have been made by others such as Anatole Leikin, who proposes that 'practically all of Scriabin's late compositions have an extra-musical meaning that is spiritual' (p. 42, 2002). Garcia goes as far as to infer a 'symbolist plot archetype' that she derives from the commonalities of thematic and structural content of the late Sonatas, suggesting that 'Scriabin repeatedly conjoined certain types of expressive language with specific musical gestures, thus creating a body of musical

symbols consistent throughout [the] late works' (2000, p.6). My contribution to this research literature consists in providing an in-depth exploration of one particular work from Scriabin's late period, this exploration being guided by performative concerns and leading to an original performance interpretation and recorded performance. While I do not put forward the associations I have made between the characteristics of certain musical material and certain aspects of Scriabin's text as an 'absolute' reading of the Sixth Sonata, my personal, subjective interpretations have been backed up, throughout the thesis, by references to historical facts, the authority of various scholars in the field, and of other performing artists. These associations, to be useful to my present study, must be understood as culturally based phenomena requiring personal interpretation through artistic practice.

2.2 Scriabin's views on Art: the *Prefatory Act*, mystic symbolism, and Wagner

Scriabin captured the unfinished text for the *Prefatory Act* in two separate notebooks, the first of which was fully revised, whilst the second remained a first draft. Together, the two notebooks – translated by Simon Morrison (2002) – form the most extensive and substantial representation of Scriabin's philosophy of art and existence. A complex expression of the evolution of the spirit from primordial spiritual awakening, through embodiment, to final dissolution and unification: above all Scriabin's is a philosophy of the power of art to unify individuals.

The concept of the *Prefatory Act* and *Mysterium* were a result of Scriabin's developing belief in the theurgic role of art within society, and the close link between art and religious experience – a belief shared by Scriabin's contemporaries, in particular the 'Mystic' symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), and the philosopher Vladimir Solov'yov (1853-1900), who deemed that '[a]rt must be a real

force ... enlightening and regenerating the entire human world' (in Brown, 1979, p. 44). Similarly, vehemently believing in the ability of art to change the world, Scriabin would argue:

Politicians and bureaucrats are *not* to be praised. Writers, composers, authors, and sculptors are the first-ranking men in the universe, first to expound principles and doctrines, and solve world problems. Real progress rests on artists alone ... They must not give place to others of lower aims ... (Bowers, 1969, p. 215).

This is an especially pertinent comment considering the political tensions in Russia at the time, which had been growing throughout the latter half of the Nineteenth-century, erupting in the failed revolution of 1905, and ultimately in the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, and the subsequent revolution of 1917. Scriabin's comments reveal a great deal about his views of art and politics and such a stance certainly found affinity with the thought of the Russian Mystic Symbolists poets, with whom Scriabin first became acquainted in 1909 when Ivanov attended a recital Scriabin had given in St Petersberg, and presented him with a copy of his own prose collection *According to the Stars* (*Po zvezdam*, 1909). Soon after, Scriabin also became acquainted with the poets Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1873-1944) and Constantine Balmont (1867-1942); it was to Balmont, Baltrušaitis and Ivanov that Scriabin read the first draft of his *Prefatory Act* libretto in 1914.

Scriabin was particularly close to Ivanov, a poet, theorist and scholar of Ancient Greece, whose views on art, religion and society were received by the composer as having a profound connection and similarity to his own. The aesthetic of the Mystic symbolists was derived from the earlier philosophizing of Solov'yov. Scriabin first encountered Solov'yov's ideas in 1898-1900 whilst attending meetings of the *Religiozno-filosofskoe obshchestvo* [Religious-philosophical society] in Moscow, upon the invitation of Prince Nikolaevich Trubetskoy (1862-1905), who was a historian and professor of Philosophy at Moscow University. At the turn of the century Russia was

on the brink of revolution and Solovyov's integration of religion and science into philosophy, and the connection he made between art and collective religious experience was influential in stoking the new religious consciousness that was emerging at that time:

[Solovyov] viewed reality as a transcendent 'total-unity' whose feeble comprehension by man required a synthesis of religion, philosophy, and science - of faith, thought, and experience. Art he stated to be a microcosm of 'total-unity' ... hence latent with theurgic energy (Brown, 1979, p. 44).

The notion of collective experience and a desire for a synthesis of the arts, religion and philosophy became central tenets to the mystic symbolist aesthetic. Ivanov termed this notion *Sobornyi*, meaning 'spiritual communion' and Scriabin would echo this concept, writing: '[t]here will be no question of the individual in the *Mystery*. It will be a collective creation, a collective act' (in Sabaneev, 1911, p. 150).

In this respect, Scriabin's *Prefatory Act* and the resulting *Mysterium* were essentially conceived as an artistic ritual, in which there would be no audience and all would be performers; the *Prefatory Act* was to function as the musical prelude to the spiritual unification of the *Mysterium*, as Scriabin realised the impossibility of composing music for such a transfiguration. In an undated diary entry, possibly from 1912, the pianist Anna Goldenweizer (1881-1929) recounts how Scriabin related a description of the forces required for his *Prefatory Act*:

In this artistic event there will not be a single spectator. All will be participants. [The *Mysterium*] requires special people, special artists, a completely different, new culture, which money does not provide... The cast of performers includes, of course, an orchestra, a large mixed choir, an instrument with visual effects, dancers, a procession, incense, rhythmicised textural articulation... The form of the cathedral, in which it will all take place, will not be of one monotonous type of stone, but will continually change, along with the atmosphere and motion of the *Mysterium*, this of course, with the aid of mists and lights, which will modify the architectural contours. (in Morrison, 2002, p. 194).

Scriabin planned for the performance to take place in a temple which would be specially built at the foot of the Himalayas, and had even investigated the logistics of

a trip to India to seek out a site. A very rough pencil sketch made by Scriabin shows the general spherical shape he envisaged:

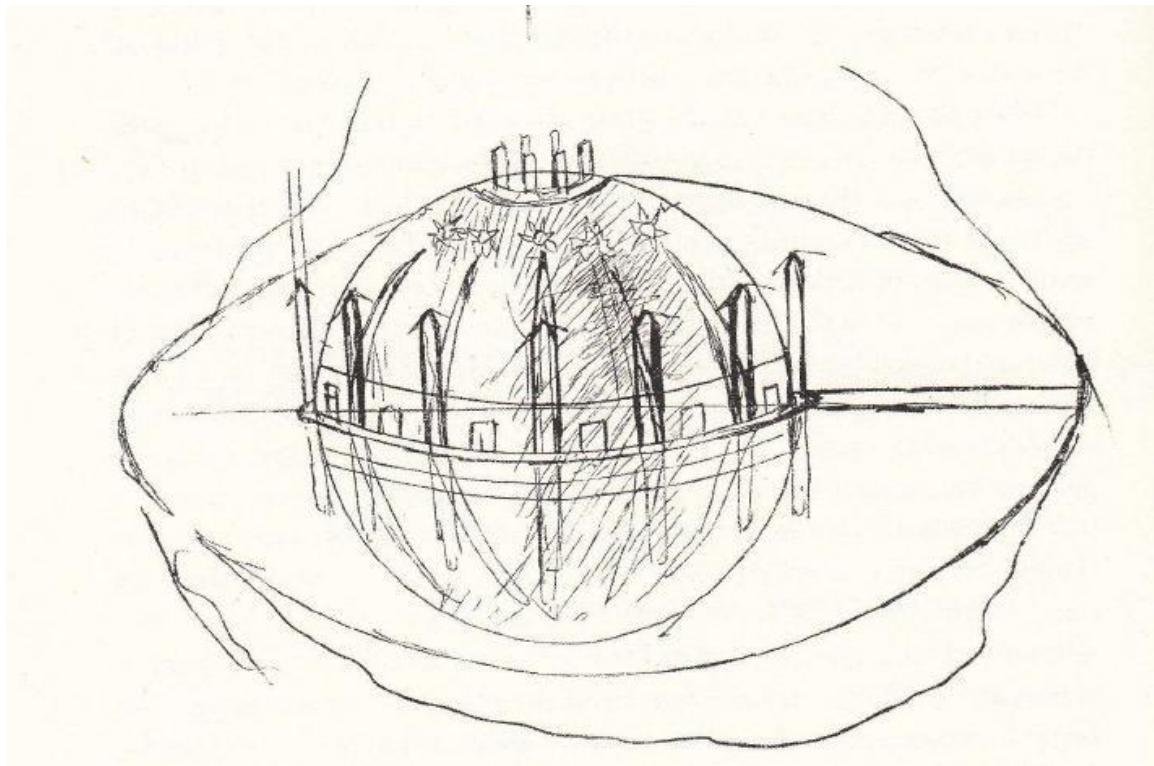


Figure 2.1: Image originally found in one of Scriabin's notebooks, taken here from Bowers (1970, p.66).

As can be seen, it is a spherical design, with seven visible, column-like, vertical structures pointing upwards and also reflecting downwards, perhaps implying twelve columns in total, taking into account the other side of the sphere. Towards the top of the sphere there seems to be what look like roughly drawn stars and the upper half of the structure appears to be reflected beneath in water – if this is the case, then the horizontal structure protruding on the right may be an entrance or bridge. The idea of a complete sphere being created out of the reflection of half a sphere may relate to Scriabin's notion of existence as made up of a duality of the spiritual and material – half is in this world, half is an intangible reflection of this world. A similar notion is referred to by Ivanov when he writes of the need for a synthesis of art and religion, resulting in an elevation: '*a realibus ad realiora*' (1909, p. 290), or 'from the real to the

more real'. In a similar fashion Solov'yov had earlier referred to the role of art, in his essay 'The General Meaning of Art', as 'the transformation of physical life into its spiritual counterpart' (1890, in West, 1970, p. 40).

Scriabin encountered this dualism of material and spiritual levels of existence – which can be traced all the way back to ancient Greek thought – through its representation in German philosophy, most notably that of Kant and Schopenhauer.⁴⁸ The latter's *World as Will and Representation* was well known to Scriabin and Ivanov, who would have been familiar with Schopenhauer's notion of a differentiated 'phenomenal', conscious existence as a visible manifestation of a hidden, unified, subconscious 'noumenal' existence. Duality of material and spiritual existence is also fundamental to Theosophy, which teaches that the spirit undergoes a seven stage evolutionary process, beginning in total unity, descending into the differentiated, material world (stage four), before ascending back to a unified, purely spiritual state. As I shall explore in section 2.3, it is this theosophical version of spiritual/material dualism that I believe ultimately provided Scriabin with the main basis of the *Prefatory Act*; it is also central, I argue, to the way in which Scriabin symbolises and characterises aspects of the text's philosophy through musical means.

Wagner

Similar to Ivanov's notion of 'a *realibus ad realiora*', Scriabin believed the performance of the *Prefatory Act* would result in a universal, collective transfiguration. To do so, as described by Goldenweizer above, the performance would unite the arts, as well as the senses, Scriabin having already experimented with combining music

⁴⁸ De Schloezer notes that 'in 1902-03, Scriabin's philosophical library included several books relating to the history of philosophy, as well as Kuno Fischer's *Immanuel Kant*' (De Schloezer, 1923, p. 71), he also states that Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* was the first philosophical book Scriabin ever read (p. 200).

with colour and light in *Prometheus* Op. 60 (1910), a work that also included a chorus and piano soloist.⁴⁹ In the *Prefatory Act* it was essential for Scriabin that all were participants; there would be no audience and all would be unified in a collective ritual, and it was in this light that he had earlier criticized Wagner for being unable to achieve a true union of performers and spectators:

Wagner (and he with all his genius) could never surmount the theatrical - the stage - never, because he didn't understand what was the matter. He didn't realise that there was no *unity*, no [genuine] experience, but only the representation of experience....The true eradication of the stage can be accomplished only in the Mystery.

The audience, the spectators are separated by the stage instead of being joined [with the performers] in a single act. *I will not have any sort of theatre* (in Brown, 1979, p. 50).

Scriabin is suggesting that in Wagner's operas, metaphysical concepts are experienced, or 'lived' by the audience through relating to their *representation* on stage, rather than *lived through authentic experience*.⁵⁰ Ivanov echoes this sentiment, suggesting that Wagner's audience could 'contemplate' but not 'create' his music dramas (1905, p. 36).⁵¹

Despite his criticism of Wagner in the above quote, Scriabin does acknowledge Wagner's genius and, as with most composers of the early twentieth-century, it is hard to imagine Scriabin not being influenced by Wagner's music and artistry. Both composers were influenced by Schopenhauer at one time or other, and the all-encompassing nature of Wagner's music dramas must surely have impressed

⁴⁹ Anna Gawboy suggests that in *Prometheus*, Scriabin had already attempted to symbolise aspects of Theosophy through large-scale musical structure; she makes this deduction based on the way she perceives the colour changes as representing a seven-stage structure, which she likens to the seven-stage process of theosophical evolution (2010).

⁵⁰ Although the particular research I present in this thesis does not address how a performance of the Sixth Sonata may be staged so as to elicit this kind of authentic experience, it is nevertheless an interesting question that relates to the wider issue of the relationship between artistic and other kinds of spiritual experiences. I return to this briefly in the Conclusion of this thesis.

⁵¹ According to Valentina Rubtsova, indications found in Scriabin's notebooks suggest that Scriabin intended the whole work to be performed over seven days – the first four days would be 'represented' and the final three days 'enacted' (1989, pp. 356-57).

Scriabin. Wagner said of his own music that it ‘depicts the creation of the world and its destruction’. Wagner achieved this portrayal by expressing philosophy through the construction and adaptation of myth as a form of universal symbolism, writing that ‘myth is true for all time, and its content, however compressed, is inexhaustible throughout the ages’ (1880-81, p. 1). This is comparable to Scriabin’s treatment of Theosophy in the *Prefatory Act*, as well as the content of his unfinished opera which – like *Tristan und Isolde* – was to be a dramatic symbolisation of philosophy. If Wagner’s music depicts the destruction of the world, Scriabin believed his music would enact its transformation.

Further notable similarities between Wagner’s music dramas and the *Prefatory Act* are found in the dramatic content of these works. Both Scriabin’s unfinished opera and the *Prefatory Act* feature a hero who instigates a universal transformation, a concept which clearly has roots in Nineteenth-century romanticism, embodied in Wagner’s Siegfried. Symbols such as world-destroying fire, as represented by Loge in *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*, are also found in the *Prefatory Act*, such as the following lines from towards the very end of the surviving libretto:

Ignite, sacred temple from hearts’ flame
Ignite and become a sacred fire
Merge blessedly in us, o ravishing father,
Merge with death in a heated dance!

The connection between fire and the merging of the masculine with death has clear sexual connotations, and brings to mind some of Brünnhilde’s final lines from *Götterdämmerung*:

A bright fire fastens on my heart
To embrace him, enfolded in his arms,
To be one with him in the intensity of love

Furthermore, both *The Ring* and *Tristan und Isolde* depict love and death as intrinsically connected and metaphysically transformative. The transfiguration in death

which Tristan and Isolde experience is due to their binding and fateful love, and their final union has a clear underlying sexual symbolism. In a similar fashion the ultimate union between Scriabin's masculine and feminine principles is a transformation through erotic love, the following lines are found towards the opening of the libretto, death associated with the feminine principle:

Love is being born!

...

Our Primordial Father
Is wedding death!'

De Schloezer further suggests that Scriabin 'saw in the sexual act the physical prototype of ecstasy ... sexual gratification gradually assumed the character of altruistic love' (1923, p. 212), describing Scriabin's opera in comparable terms to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* as a 'spectacle of ecstasy, of individual death and spiritual transformation' (1923, p. 181).⁵²

Scriabin's ambition and belief in the destiny of his art was ultimately even more extreme than that of Wagner – even causing Ivanov and Sabaneev, despite their similar aesthetic outlook, to question Scriabin's state of mind towards the end of his life.⁵³ At its heart though is art, and the power of artistic experience to transform, both spiritually and socially during a period of Russian history notable for social unrest and increasing political tensions. It is perhaps in this context that Scriabin's vision for the future of art can be best understood and accepted today; it is a vision of inclusiveness in which anyone who is open and receptive is embraced in shared artistic experience, and testament to the ability of art to bridge cultural and sociological divides during times of social struggle.

⁵² On another level Scriabin's plan to build a temple in which to enact his great Mystery has echoes of Wagner's decision to build his own opera house at Bayreuth.

⁵³ Ivanov reported to the painter Nikolai Ulyanov (1875-1949) that 'Scriabin is unstable! ... There's something wrong with him, a serious spiritual ailment' (Mil'nikova, 1983). See also Sabaneev (1925, p.82).

2.3 Theosophy and Russia's 'Silver' Age

In Mystic Symbolism Scriabin found kindred spirits such as Ivanov who shared his ideology; in Wagner he found inspiration both artistically and philosophically in the scale of the great composer's achievements. Theosophy afforded form to Scriabin's spiritual doctrine and highly idiomatic eschatology, and in the following section I briefly discuss the enthusiasm for the occult amongst artists at the beginning of the twentieth-century in relation to social tensions and change. I follow this with an exploration of the relationship of theosophical doctrine to the content of the *Prefatory Act*.

Russia's Silver Age saw a growing interest in the Occult amongst artists and philosophers alike. Occultism covered a broad range of esoteric dogma, including Spiritism, Hermeticism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, and even Satanism. The philosopher Vladimir Solov'yov (1853-1900), authors Andrei Bely (1880-1934) and Valery Bryusov (1873-1924), poets Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949), Konstantin Balmont (1867-1942), and Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1873-1944), and artists Vasilly Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Nikolai Shperling (1880-1915), among others, were all drawn towards aspects of occultism.⁵⁴ The popularity of such practices amongst artists of the time may be best perceived as a reflection of the disillusionment with, and rebellion against, established social, political, religious and artistic norms:

A shift to the occult as subject matter for literature and art is symptomatic of disaffection from orthodox belief (in this case Christianity) and is often accompanied by a sense of remorse, as if the intellectual had dispensed with a God in whom it was impossible to believe, but whose absence was also disconcerting (Groberg, 1997, p. 101).

Disaffection with the Tsarist regime may be traced back to the mid-Nineteenth-century

⁵⁴ Occultism, in an extraordinary variety of forms, was extremely fashionable amongst the educated. Most would have had some knowledge of Spiritualism and Theosophy, but the occult covered a wide range of activity: Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Martinism, Hermeticism, as well as somnambulism, chiromancy, tarot, phrenology, mesmerism, astrology, fortune-telling, crystal balls, and dream interpretation. Séances, both public and private were popular, as were displays of hypnotism, and addresses given by famous Indian yogis.

and gained momentum for a number of complex reasons, most notably through the relinquishment of Serfdom, an increase in student subcultures caused by greater social and political awareness, and an escalation in the array of independent publications throughout the latter half of the century.⁵⁵

For some – such as Ivanov – elements of Theosophy and mysticism had the potential to revitalise Orthodox Christianity; Ivanov advocated for the incorporation of the mystic – as well as aspects of Dionysian religion – into established religious dogma as a means of achieving spiritual union through art. For others, such as the painter Shperling, and the author Bryusov, it provided a path away from the confines of Orthodox religion towards the ‘dark sciences’ and aspects of the satanic.⁵⁶ This diverse interest amongst artists in varying aspects of the occult led to a flurry of artistic creative activity – known as the ‘Silver’ Age – in which the spiritual and mystic became the inspiration for new and original artistic expression:

In the small, intimate world of the Russian intelligentsia, in which Scriabin lived, there was a frantic attempt to cope creatively with the decay of old cultural values, to escape creatively from the impending crisis of culture and consciousness, to bridge the growing chasm between science and religion, reason and faith. Ironically, these psychological and philosophical tensions created in Russian cultural life at the turn of the century an intense period of blossoming in all the arts (Carlson, 2000).

Scriabin was raised in the Orthodox Christian tradition but ultimately turned away from Orthodox religion and towards his own inner search for a personal, spiritual, eschatology. According to his brother-in-law Boris de Schloezer, much of Scriabin’s belief system was divined intuitively, meaning that when he first seriously encountered Theosophy around 1906 – just one year after the failed attempt to overthrow Tsar Nicholas II – it wasn’t so much that Theosophy taught him fundamentally new ideas,

⁵⁵ For a more detailed description, see *Russia* (Acton, 1995, pp. 65-120).

⁵⁶ Scriabin was acquainted with Shperling, and several paintings of the artist currently still hang in Scriabin’s Moscow apartment. Shperling was reported to have explored the dark side of the occult to the extreme – devouring the flesh of dead and dying soldiers during World War I.

but rather that Theosophy resonated with his own, already intuitively formed, concepts.

Scriabin's path away from the traditions and confines of Orthodox religion and towards Theosophy can be seen as early as his notebooks from 1891-92, which display a spiritual struggle and search for inner knowledge:

1. Good. Ideal. Truth, Goal outside myself.
2. Disappointment at failure to reach 1. Tirade against God.
3. Search for these ideals within myself. Protest. Freedom.
4. Scientific basis for Freedom (Knowledge).
5. Religion.

The above is a process of suffering and the subsequent acquisition of knowledge. In my view, this may provide the seed of what would ultimately be expressed more fully in Scriabin's two unfinished libretti, that of the Opera (1902-04) and the *Prefatory Act*. Both describe the suffering of a hero, and a following universal spiritual transformation through the attainment of knowledge.

Further examples of Scriabin's profound belief in his inner search for knowledge are displayed in his statement that 'Man can explain the universe by studying himself alone' (De Schloezer, 1923, p. 203), and his suggestion, captured in one of his notebooks, that 'to analyse actuality one must study the nature of my active consciousness and of my free creativity' (*ibid.*). De Schloezer comments further on the importance Scriabin placed on the spiritual during times of social struggle:

... economic and political upheavals, however spectacular, had for Scriabin only a secondary importance, for he posited the supremacy of the spiritual life ... he injected into socialist doctrines some religious and mystical elements ... (1923, p. 66).⁵⁷

It was perhaps then in this context that Scriabin first encountered Theosophy and it was to resonate with him profoundly.

Here [in Theosophy] we can definitely speak of an influence, for when I saw Scriabin a few months later in Switzerland [in 1906] he was deeply engaged in

⁵⁷ De Schloezer is unclear whether he considers Scriabin's pre-occupation with the spiritual to be in reaction to social struggle and change, or whether Scriabin simply engaged more with the spiritual than in his surrounding political environment. It is my view that it is not unreasonable to consider this a response to the ongoing build up to the 1905 revolution, which had been brewing for decades.

reading works by Mme. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, C.W. Leadbeater, and other theosophists. His conversation was full of theosophical allusions to Manvantara, Pralaya, Seven Planes, Seven Races ... (De Schloezer, 1923, P. 67).

It may not be too far to suggest that Scriabin escaped the turmoil and upheaval in the outside world by looking towards the spiritual, believing his art capable of instigating social and spiritual change through shared artistic experience.

2.4 Theosophy and the *Prefatory Act*

Before exploring the ways in which the concepts expressed in the *Prefatory Act* libretto may be connected to and symbolized in the music, I will first offer a summary of the text. In doing so I will explore its principal themes, and the connections with Theosophy and Mystic Symbolism that are relevant to an understanding of the evolution of the text, and as a precursor to the musical symbolism of the piano works from the same period, specifically the Sixth Sonata. The ‘story’ of the *Prefatory Act* is pure metaphysics, with its basis as Theosophy, and it may be broadly approached as a symbolist expression of theosophical concepts.⁵⁸ In addition to Theosophy, it includes references to Mystic Symbolism, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Wagner.

The revised text from the first notebook may be read as a symbolist interpretation of the first three stages of theosophical evolution, as put forward in Helena Blavatsky’s (1831-1891) magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Blavatsky derived her notion of cosmic evolution from a synthesis of Eastern religions and texts, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Theosophical evolution may be best understood as a seven-stage process in which the spirit undergoes constant cyclic reincarnation, beginning in a purely spiritual state, descending through the first three stages to the material fourth – in which individual consciousness emerges, and in which

⁵⁸ Morrison holds a similar view (2002, pp. 201-214).

theosophists believe we currently preside – before ascending through stages five to seven, returning to the purely spiritual state once more. This process is repeated numerous times, each time attaining a more heightened spiritual state.

Central to Scriabin's adaptation of this process is the duality and polarity he perceived between masculine and feminine. Scriabin associated the masculine with the active, creative spirit, whilst the feminine represented its passive, receptive, sensuous counterpart. In the primordial state of oneness the masculine and feminine are undifferentiated. As the spirit descends into consciousness, the polarity between them increases. Scriabin connected the masculine with the 'I' or the active spirit, and the feminine with the 'non-I', or passive matter – the physical manifestation in the phenomenal world of the fundamental feminine principle (De Schloezer, 1923, p. 209). As the evolutionary process unfolds, spirit and matter become more differentiated, Scriabin describing the epoch in which we currently exist as the 'moment of highest tension', connecting increased differentiation with erotic desire (De Schloezer, 1923, p. 214).⁵⁹

It can be argued that In the *Prefatory Act* libretto, Scriabin expresses his interpretation of the theosophical cyclic process of continued spiritual evolution through the use of a complex collection of symbols: a Chorus, a Masculine Principle, a Feminine Principle, the Waves of life, a single Wave, a Light beam, Mountains, Fields, Desert, Wilderness and a human hero.⁶⁰ The seven-stage journey of the spirit is symbolised on various spiritual and material levels, first as the Masculine Principle, before eventually materializing as a self-destructive and violent human hero, possibly

⁵⁹ Morrison (2002) suggests that Scriabin associated masculine/feminine with the theosophical terms 'lower' and 'higher manas'. I have been unable to verify this in any of my sources, nor have I found any such association in Blavatsky's theosophical writing. This is not to say that such a connection doesn't exist, only that I have been unable to ascertain how such a link has been formed.

⁶⁰ For another exploration of the theosophical content of the *Prefatory Act* see Simon Morrison (2002).

derived from a similar character in Scriabin's earlier plans for an opera. Similarly to the surviving fragments of the opera libretto, the hero sacrifices himself so as to reveal to the rest of humanity the path, through death, to the purely spiritual, unified state of existence.

The symbols Scriabin uses function like fictional characters within the text, and though they are not human characters, they each exude specific characteristics and roles. In exploring the Sixth Sonata, I have come to the conclusion that the Sonata may be interpreted as containing musical themes – quasi-leitmotifs – which share the same characteristics as some of these 'characters', or symbols, most notably the Feminine and Masculine Principles, as well as the Waves of Life and the single Wave. In the following summary of the *Prefatory Act* text, I attempt to build a 'character profile' for each symbol, and suggest how this 'profile' might be represented in musical and compositional terms.

2.5 The character and energy levels of Scriabin's symbols: sacrifice and desire

The opening sections of the text are concerned with duality – as symbolised by the Masculine and Feminine Principles, and the Wave and the Light-beam; each of these characters is presented with particular features which may be perceived as relating to different 'energy' levels. The Masculine Principle is presented as active, fiery, violent, and passionate; the Feminine Principle is more passive, seductive, dreamy, and at times ominous and dangerous; the Wave(s) are presented as being able to move between these states of highly energized desire and languorous reverie. The notion of different energy states – or characters defined by different energy levels – may be of use with regard to certain passages of the Sixth Sonata that are relatable to these characteristics, due in part to the relatability of energy levels to notions of

tempo, rhythm and dynamic, inflection and impulse.

After an introduction from the Chorus, the text begins with a dialogue between the Feminine and Masculine Principles, which may be understood as spiritual manifestations of a hidden, fundamental duality. I have already suggested that Scriabin perceived an inherent tension in the relationship between masculine and feminine, and in this respect we may understand the relationship between them as one of erotic desire. This notion is expounded by Smith (2010, 2013) in relation to a psycho-analytical interpretation of Scriabin's harmony, and which I explore in detail in Chapter 3. Desire is depicted in Scriabin's libretto through the eroticism of the Masculine Principle's longing to ascend to and unite with the Feminine Principle through love, they sing prophetically together:

In you [love] we will attain victory over the abyss,
In you we, mutually rejoicing, will find ourselves,
In you we will blissfully expire in each other.

The 'abyss' here refers to the material state, sometimes referred to as the 'abyss of life', and this passage predicts the journey of the Masculine through differentiated existence and the ongoing desire for a return to unity. Desire requires sacrifice, and the Feminine Principle instructs that the Masculine must undergo 'three sacrifices in intoxicating transience' in order to reach her, the first being to forget the dream vision of her and to plunge into the intoxicating visions, or abysses, of life. She sings:

You [the Masculine Principle] now live and, drawing nearer to me
Lives bear you away from me
Surrounding you with intoxicating visions
Glittering and frothing, shining and twanging.

The adjectives found here lead us into the following section – in which the characters of the Waves and Light beam emerge – 'glittering' and 'shining' later used to describe the Light beam, 'frothing' and 'twanging' the Waves of life.

I would speculate that the emergence of the Waves of life at this point is

intrinsically linked with the opening dialogue between the Masculine and Feminine Principles, and would argue that the Waves of life are in fact the ‘seven angels’ of which the Feminine sings, and through which the Masculine will find his path back to her:

Behold: seven angels in ethereal vestments ...
These are the heaven-dwellers
Fire-bearers
Overseers of destinies
World builders
Border guards
God’s warriors
Wall destroyers

They are yours [the masculine’s], the progeny pulling you apart ...
Your path to me lies in their negating flourishing...
They are the builders of the sparkling temple,
Where the drama of world creation must occur,
Where in delightful dance, in marriage to me
You will find the other world you desire.

The description of the Masculine being ‘pulled apart’ perhaps suggests a reference to the differentiation of material existence and in the section which follows, the Waves of life are presented as an initiating energy, able to move between dark and light, and spiritual and material states. In this regard, a connection with the ‘seven angels’ in the above text is justified; for instance ‘Heaven-dwellers’ clearly relates to the spiritual, whereas ‘Fire-bearers’ suggests a Promethean break from heaven and descent to man. The oscillating nature of the Waves is further displayed when they are described as ‘[a] current, directed from eternity to an instant/ [o]n the path to humanity’, eternity is here concerned with the spiritual, and ‘an instant’ refers to the creation of time, a material concept.

The characteristics displayed by the Waves supports a theosophical link, in particular to the notion of *Svara*, or the ‘current of the life wave’:

‘All the world is the *Svara*; *Svara* is the Spirit itself’ — the ONE LIFE or *motion*’ say the old books of Hindu Occult philosophy. The proper translation of the word *Svara* is the *current of the life wave*, ... It is that wavy motion which is the cause of the evolution of cosmic undifferentiated matter into the differentiated universe. . . .

From whence does this motion come? This motion is the spirit itself. ... [it] carries the idea of eternal motion ... The primeval current of the life-wave is then the same which assumes in man the form of inspiratory and expiratory motion of the lungs, and this is the all-pervading source of the evolution and involution of the universe' (Theosociety.org, 2016).

Similarly, Scriabin's Waves represent a universal, oscillating energy that is able to ascend and descend between the spiritual and material; a life-giving force, manifesting in the material as human breathing, as represented by a human hero. The Waves are presented further as able to move between different energy levels, such as those described above of the Masculine and Feminine Principles, indicated in the following lines:

Having flowed as waves
Into valleys of languor,
We turned into
Storm clouds of desire

As the libretto progresses, the words used to describe the Waves gain energy; Scriabin first using words such as 'timid', 'rumbles', 'murmurs', later introducing words such as 'swelling', 'froths', 'flares', 'rippling' and even 'kissing'. These contrasting descriptions suggest a possible connection with two of the thematic ideas of the Sixth Sonata. One theme is accompanied by the description *Souffle Mystérieux* – 'mysterious breath' or 'murmur', both of which have a possible connection to the above descriptions, as well as the theosophical notion of the material manifestation of the Wave as breathing. Similarly, Scriabin describes another theme as *onde carresante* – or 'caressing wave' – which brings to mind the 'kissing' description referred to above, as well as the erotic nature of desire.

2.6 The Wave and the Light Beam

Scriabin symbolises the masculine-feminine duality on a number of different levels throughout the libretto. After the song of the Waves, a single Wave is separated

to undergo the first union with the Light beam, the nouns used being feminine and masculine respectively.⁶¹ Analogous to the Waves, the masculine symbol of the Light beam may also be rooted in Theosophy, Blavatsky referring to light in *The Secret Doctrine* as born out of a more primal state: ‘Darkness is Father-Mother: light their son’ (1888, p. 12). A further connection may be drawn between the Light beam and the theosophical ‘Ray’. Scriabin’s depiction of the union of Light beam and Wave – and the subsequent creation of the differentiated world – echoes *The Secret Doctrine*, in which the ‘Ray’ – or light – enters into the cosmic depths, initiating the emergence of a differentiated, conscious being called ‘Oeoahoo’, the man-God who reveals the truth of the universe. Scriabin was clearly aware of this aspect of theosophical doctrine as ‘Oeoahoo’ is the word sung by the chorus towards the end of *Prometheus*; it seems probable to me that Scriabin drew some connection between ‘Oeoahoo’ and the man-god hero who emerges later on in the libretto.

The marriage of the Wave and Light beam brings to fruition the creation of the material, their unification represented as the ‘starry face of the created world’, or the stars and cosmos; the Wave now looking towards consciousness and differentiation; the Light beam manifest as the light of the sun and stars. Scriabin describes their union as giving rise to the consciousness of the world, in which the images of the earth – depicted in the libretto by the mountains, fields, forests and wilderness – are ‘brocades

⁶¹ There has always seemed to me a discrepancy in Scriabin’s masculine/feminine association of Light/Wave. De Schloezer writes many times that Scriabin connected the Spirit with the masculine element – i.e. with himself – so it seems strange that he would choose a feminine noun for the Wave, given that, in Theosophy, the life-wave is associated with the Spirit, as previously described. Similarly, De Schloezer also insists upon Scriabin’s masculine/feminine, spirit/matter association. In this regard it would make more sense for light to be feminine, as it is essentially what defines the phenomenal world. It is possible that De Schloezer misinterpreted Scriabin here, however I find this unlikely given the amount of time he spends describing Scriabin’s adaptation of Theosophy. It is therefore possibly an oversight on Scriabin’s part, or simply an example of him taking the elements of Theosophy which resonated with his own ideas, and discarding the rest – perhaps, for him, the spirit and life-wave were different concepts. Whatever the reason, what remains is essentially the same as described, Scriabin symbolising gender duality on a number of different levels, with the wave as a life giving energy, moving between different states and energy levels.

of its veils'; a differentiated reality, behind which lies a hidden, unified reality, akin to the distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal.

There are many layers of allegory within the text of the *Prefatory Act*, particularly in relation to notions of duality and opposition, referred to as 'reflections' which suggests that whilst two things are differentiated they are also the same, perhaps alluding to the idea that the divine is reflected in the material, hence Scriabin's exploration of opposition and dualism on various levels. The themes of opposition and duality permeate every layer of Scriabin's philosophy, and he draws parallels between the different levels of desire and union of these opposing principles: the desired union of the Masculine and Feminine Principles and the union of the feminine Wave and the masculine Light beam, which ultimately leads to the creation of the material world and human desire, the opposite and contrasting nature of these elements further represented by the mountains and fields, as well as the forest and wilderness. Theosophy presents a similarly multilayered dualism, in which the Masculine and Feminine Principles are associated with the Father-Mother: 'the opposite poles that manifest in all things on every plane of Kosmos, or Spirit and Substance' (1888, p. 12). Scriabin, in similar fashion, symbolises the masculine-feminine desire, contrast and duality on several different spiritual and material levels.

2.7 The text continued: sacrifice and rebirth

The text from the first notebook describes theosophical and philosophical events that have already happened earlier in the evolutionary circle, whereas the second notebook brings events into the present and future tenses. Scriabin's libretto is here concerned with the return to heightened spiritual unity through the embracing of suffering and the sacrifice of the self – as symbolised by the hero – which results in

dissolution and spiritual unification through erotic love. Scriabin often referred to this process as the small empirical ‘I’ recognizing itself in the universal big ‘I’ (De Schloezer, 1923, p. 65); the small ‘I’ referring to individual, differentiated consciousness, the big ‘I’ to undifferentiated, unconscious unity; once again akin to Schopenhauer’s concept of phenomenal and noumenal.

This section begins with a continuation of the plight of the Wave, now referred to as the Hero-wave, as it descends into materiality, referred to at one point as the ‘fire-bearer’ who must sacrifice herself:

You as a wave
Having ascended, must
Return to your obscure primal state
You as a wave
Having regained sight, must
Give us your borrowed light!

The notion of the wave as a fire-bearer giving ‘borrowed light’ may allude to Prometheus, who stole fire from the Gods and sacrificed himself to suffering as a result, this defiance of the Gods also has echoes of Satan and Lucifer, a connection which may be further supported by the description of the Hero-wave as a ‘bright angel’.

Whatever the origins of the Hero-wave, the content of the text descends into a vision of horror, violence and suffering, perhaps further supporting the concept of the Waves as able to oscillate between opposing states, in this case from the spiritual into the material, and ultimately from a pure existence into a far darker, more terrifying, and ominous state. The *Dance song of the fallen*, which follows, contains the following lines:

A bewitched choir, we whirl
In two combined tornadoes
Over the paths, over the pitted
Paths, covered by corpses

We inhale the stench of black blood
It lusts for loathsome delights ...

The break from heaven is directly alluded to, as the spirit turns away from eternity and seeks embodiment:

So in godforsaken places the pilgrim spirit,
Frenzied, wildly celebrates
His sacred breach with heaven
Heeding dark summons

...

After brief contacts with it [eternity]

The passions draw us towards embodiment⁶²

What follows is the emergence of the human hero and his encounter with death. The hero is presented as a violent force, barbaric and unrelenting; a darker manifestation of the Masculine Principle, he embraces the horror of death, and describes himself as 'the God of greed and destruction ... the God of blood'. After defeat in battle, he flees into the wilderness where he suffers the realization of 'his deep, unexpiated guilt', and 'lacerated, all covered in abrasions' he 'perishes under an awesome wave' and 'strives to the light following someone's gentle call'.

The hero's suffering brings him face to face with Death, the Eternal Feminine, as symbolised by the Feminine Principle, and is instructed to return to life and atone for his sins:

[You must] prepare people to accept suffering
[You must] be sacrificed and thus attain grace
Heed the secret calls of the soul and hasten
To bring the tidings of heaven
To the dying

She continues:

Teach them

...

That in suffering is the light
And that in the light is the answer
That I am this answer

⁶² Scriabin's descriptions in this passage bear a similarity to certain descriptions of the Black Mass, a frenzied ritual practiced by certain Occultists and Satanists in the nineteenth-century, in particular see Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Là-Bas* (1891) and Valery Bryusov's *The Fiery Angel* (1907-08) both of which are likely to have been known to Scriabin, and those within his artistic circle.

There is more than a partial echo of Nietzsche in these lines, particularly the acceptance of suffering as part of life. Enlightened, the hero is then reborn into the world, tasked with spreading the prophecy that has been revealed to him. Ivanov likens the hero to Scriabin himself:

The prophet lies ‘in the desert’ as a corpse ... because henceforth all his previous connections to the world are severed. Scriabin craved precisely this terrible communion with a mystery that devours man, for ... the mystery could not be achieved in any other way. Once it is realized, it would no longer be *his* creation ... but would become a matter of the universal spirit ... he compared himself to a ‘chalice’ ... he wanted the entire man within him to become wholly an artist, without remainder. For to be an artist meant for him only one thing: to be both the bringer of sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. (1915, p. 224).

2.8 The Mystic symbolists: death and dual-faceted feminine symbolism

I have suggested that the Feminine Principle of Scriabin’s text is portrayed as symbolizing both beauty and the horror of death, both of which are desired by the various representations of the Masculine Principle, though death is first rejected as ‘horrid’. This dual-faceted portrayal of the feminine symbol may have been influenced by aspects of Ivanov’s mystic symbolism, and in particular his essay *Ancient Terror* (1909) in which he explores his perception of the metaphysical symbolism that lay behind Leon Bakst’s painting *Terror Antiquus*, referring at length to associations made with the Masculine and Feminine Principles, as found in Greek Mythology and other ancient writings. Interestingly he presents the feminine as a multifaceted principle, the ‘Goddess of Love’ and ‘Fate the Destroyer’, love associated with life, fate with death, Ivanov quoting his own *Cor Ardens* – a copy of which Scriabin owned – “Know me”, so sang Death: “I am passion” (1908).

Similarly to Scriabin, Ivanov refers to the masculine as an active principle, described as ‘ferociously self-affirming, active and violent’ (1909, p. 154) and portrays the relationship between the masculine and feminine as one in which the masculine is

doomed to death as a result of its desire for the feminine, not dissimilar to the sirens of Greek mythology or the water-nymph Ondine:

It is she [the feminine] that condemns to death the masculine element, and the masculine element dies, paying retribution for female love, it dies because it did not satisfy the Insatiable One. (*ibid*, p.156)

This Ivanov refers to as the ‘unconscious, primordial memory of the mortally doomed nature of the masculine element’ (*ibid*), perhaps akin to the doomed hero in Scriabin’s libretto, and similar to the very opening of Scriabin’s text in which the chorus, introducing the Masculine and Feminine Principles, sings:

Greatness is being fulfilled
And, sweet anew,
Love is being born!

In burning hearts
Our Primordial Father
Is wedding death!

The connection between the masculine hero of Scriabin’s text and Ivanov’s notion of the doomed masculine element may be further supported when Ivanov goes on to connect the masculine principle with the suffering God Dionysus:

... the male correlate had to have a relative character, to appear in the aspect of a principle that is subject to disappearance and experiences death. The male correlate of the absolute goddess acquired traits of the suffering god, like Dionysus ... (1909, p. 157).

It seems probable that Scriabin associated Dionysian suffering with the suffering hero, particularly as when the hero is reborn ‘spring reigns in his soul’, in a similar way the association of Dionysus with sacrifice and rebirth leads to him being frequently referred to as the God of spring.

I argue in the following chapters that the dual-faceted portrayal of the Feminine Principle in the *Prefatory Act* text may be symbolised and alluded to in Scriabin’s music from the same period – for example, in *Etrangeté Op. 63*, which includes descriptions such as *avec une fausse douceur*, or ‘with false sweetness’. Similarly, I have come to

interpret the second subject area of the Sixth Sonata as representing the seductiveness and beauty of the Feminine Principle, leading to a section that is terrifying and dissonant, and marked ‘the horror surges forward’. These are just two of a number of examples which refer to the dual-faceted nature of the feminine symbol.

2.9 Dance and dissolution

The remaining part of Scriabin’s unrevised text describes the embracing of death in pure love, resulting in delirium, ecstasy and dissolution back to a purely spiritual state. Throughout the text, Scriabin presents the Waves as a life-energy; a universal force which serves both light and dark forces, and which is able to move between the spiritual and material planes. Towards the end of the text Scriabin echoes an earlier stanza, previously sung by the Waves, only this time it is brought into the present tense, the implication being that this is happening in our present day consciousness:

We are all in love
A current, directed
From an instant to eternity on the path to infinity
From stony gloom to radiant transparency

...

We are carried away
By the vision of death
We are calmed
In our motion

Ignite, Sacred temple from heart’s flame
Ignite and become a scared fire
Merge blessedly in us, o ravishing father,
Merge with death in a heated dance!

At this point death is finally embraced in a fiery, ecstatic Dionysian dance; through loving union with death, consciousness is extinguished, echoing Ivanov’s description of Dionysian ecstasy in his essay *Nietzsche and Dionysus*:

... the human soul can reach such a state only on the condition of its egress, its ecstatic transport beyond the limits of the empirical “I”, on the condition that it

partake of the unity of the universal "I" in its willing and suffering, fullness and schism, breathing and lamentation. Within this holy intoxication and orgiastic oblivion, one should distinguish the state of tortuously blessed oversaturation, the sense of miraculous power and surfeit of strength, the consciousness of an impersonal and will-less elemental force, and the terror and ecstasy of the loss of the self in chaos ... (1904).

Fire is an important element in Scriabin's conception of dissolution and transfiguration, explicitly referred to by the composer in such works as *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* and *Vers la flamme*, Scriabin possibly associating the symbol of fire with the emergence of 'Will': fire is stolen from the Gods by Prometheus and given to man, a heroic action which causes Prometheus great suffering. Fire is also a passionate, all-engulfing force which leaves nothing behind, making it an ideal symbol for the final dance and following transcending of material existence.

In the final lines Scriabin switches to the future tense, describing the resulting dissolution into unity and the text ends with the dissolution of the self, resulting from the small 'I' recognizing itself in the big 'I', or in Schopenhaurian terms, the conscious, differentiated, time- and experience-based phenomenal world giving way to an undifferentiated, eternal, unconscious, noumenal world:

In this final moment of divestment
We will cast off the eternities of our instants
Into this final lyre-consonance

We will dissolve in the ethereal whirlwind

We will be born in the whirlwind!
We will awaken in heaven!
We will merge emotions in a united wave!

[...]

We will disappear...
Dissolve...

De Schloezer interprets Scriabin's notion of dissolution as the moment of 'ecstasy', as when the 'personal will is identified with the divine command' (1923, p. 223) and draws a further connection with Dionysian religion, arguing that '[e]cstasy, which is the crucial

point of Scriabin's eschatology, [is] expressive of that final moment of blessed liberation inherent in the Dionysian cults' (*ibid*).

Through use of the collective personal pronoun 'we', the references to 'heaven' and 'merging emotions', Scriabin's description of dissolution suggests a quasi-religious amalgamation, or blending together of individual entities into a singularity. In musical terms, I would suggest that the initial unification of individual entities could be represented by the coalescing of individual themes, and argue in Chapter 5 that the piano may offer the perfect tool for creating the melded 'sound' of dissolution, namely the sustaining pedal. I will suggest that Scriabin attempts to depict dissolution musically through the layering of thematic elements in conjunction with the continued use of the sustaining pedal, creating complex textures in which individual melodic elements are mixed, 'bleeding' into, and partially obscuring each other; I will discuss how this may be achieved in the recapitulation of the Sixth Sonata. In addition, I will explore how Scriabin may refer explicitly in the Sixth Sonata to the notion of a dance which embraces the horrors of Dionysian ecstasy through the description 'the horror surges forward and mingles in the delirious dance', and how this may be interpreted as further evidence for a strong connection between Scriabin's philosophy, text and music, and how an understanding of the dance in these terms has been manifest in practice.

Chapter 3

The *Prefatory Act* Text and Musical Symbolism

In this chapter I offer a more general analytical exploration of the piano works composed between 1911 and 1914, whilst further developing my argument that a link may be discernable between the principal ideas of the *Prefatory Act* libretto and elements of the music, and suggesting that Scriabin's musical language may be best understood as a form of musical symbolism. Whilst this interpretation is not necessarily representative of Scriabin's actual intention, I argue that there is strong justification for such a reading, which may be of particular significance with regard to performative interpretation. In exploring other works from the same period as the Sixth Sonata – as well as features of Scriabin's harmonic world and possible use of sonata-form – I show how such an understanding was reached, and reflect in the following chapters upon how this interpretation has related to my performances of this work during the period of research, as well as how both research and practice have been mutually informative.

3.1 Reflection, Polarity and Duality

One of the defining themes of the *Prefatory Act* is that of *opposition*, both as contrast and as 'reflection', and one way to understand Scriabin's depiction of opposing principles is to consider them as representing various allegorical meanings, each of which ultimately spring from the same fundamental duality. While displaying commonalities, these opposing principles do not necessarily relate to each other narratively. In the same way, Scriabin's late piano music can be seen to symbolise the concept of duality in a variety of ways, which – while taking different forms on the

surface – always originate from the core notion of opposition and contrast. In the following section, I explore the potential parallels between the symbolisation of the principle of *opposition* in the *Prefatory Act* and in Scriabin's late music in general.

Scriabin's symbolism of duality is discernable on a number of different levels, some of which will be expanded on and explored individually below:

- On the larger structural level – the use of sonata-form as a possible basis of masculine-feminine symbolism, and the historical roots of the perception of the form in this way.
- On the intervallic level – the importance of the tritone as a possible basis of the mystic chord; and Scriabin's notion of 'polarity' and the relation of this to his 'colour hearing' derived from the relatively small level of invariance between dominant 7th-based harmonies related by a tritone; and the multiple possible 'resolutions' this interval may suggest.
- On the harmonic level – the use and formation of the mystic chord and the 'impure' and 'pure' harmonies to be found within it, as well as the maintaining to some degree of the major/minor contrast, which is frequently related to the melodic movement of a semitone.
- On the melodic level – the composition of melodic material, or 'leitmotifs', with contrasting masculine and feminine characteristics. Additionally, the use of melodic 'reflection'.
- On a general level – many of his late piano opuses taking the form of pairs of miniatures, frequently contrasted in mood, tempo and character, often employing contrasting harmonic and melodic elements.

3.2 Gender and sonata-form

In the following discussion I explore sonata-form as represented in Scriabin's Sixth Sonata, with particular reference to nineteenth-century notions of gender, providing a further basis for suggesting a link between the text of the *Prefatory Act* and the music of the Sixth Sonata. One of my arguments is that Scriabin uses sonata-form to characterise the Masculine and Feminine Principles of the *Prefatory Act* in musical terms. In this connection, I evaluate Scriabin's gender-role associations within the context of other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century notions of gender, as well as within a more contemporary perspective.

Analysing Scriabin's late Sonatas as instances of sonata-form requires acknowledging that there are many 'versions' of this form: indeed, sonata-form need not be seen as a rigid, pre-defined compositional framework, but as adaptable and extendable. While the sonata-form as employed by Scriabin does contain elements resembling the ternary structure of sonata-form, namely exposition, development and recapitulation, it is also much extended in his hands, particularly with respect to the closing coda and the inclusion of a third subject area in Sonata No. 6. Within this structure I have come to discern a possible link between Scriabin's treatment of the subject areas of sonata-form and the masculine-feminine dualism present in the *Prefatory Act*, in particular the connection of the first and second subject areas to the Masculine and Feminine Principles.

The association of certain elements of sonata-form with masculine-feminine duality existed long before Scriabin; and it was in researching this literature that my attention was drawn to a possible connection between the gender dualism represented in text of the *Prefatory Act* and Scriabin's treatment of sonata-form. Already in the writings of A. B. Marx (1795-1866), Hugo Riemann (1849-1919) and Vincent d'Indy

(1851-1931), the first subject is viewed as representing the ‘active’, ‘heroic’ and ‘powerful’ masculine, whereas the second subject is characterised as the ‘passive’, ‘receptive’, ‘gentler’ feminine. Marx refers briefly to these notions in *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition* as early as 1845, characterising the two themes of the exposition as follows:

... the main theme is the first one, therefore first and foremost the decisive one in freshness and energy, therefore the one constructed more energetically, more vigorously, more completely – the dominant one and the decisive one. The subsidiary theme [“Seitensatz”] ... serves as contrast, constructed and determined by the preceding, thus by nature necessarily the gentler, cultivated more flexibly than vigorously – the feminine, as it were, to that preceding masculine. In this sense each of the two themes is different and only with the other becomes something higher, more perfect. (1845, in Citron, 1993, p.273).

Another similar reference to the characterization of the two themes is found in Reimann’s *Katechismus der Musik (Allgemeine Musiklehre)* from 1888, stating:

As a rule sonata-form is laid out with a strong, characteristic, first theme – representative of the masculine principle, so to speak – and a contrasting, lyrical, gentle second theme, representing the feminine principle, usually in a different but related tonality ... (1888, p. 128).⁶³

It is apparent from these texts that in music theory during the nineteenth-century there were at least some association of gender with musical forms. However, James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy approach such gender-based readings of sonata-form with caution, suggesting that the types of description offered by Marx and Reimann refer to works which follow this particular pattern, but that there are many works from the seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries which may be considered to be in sonata-form without fitting into this theory of form (2006, pp. 145-147). They acknowledge that such perceptions of sonata-form did begin to consciously emerge in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, with particular reference to overtures by Wagner and Weber.

⁶³ The theories of Riemann were widely taught at this time and so it seems likely that Scriabin would have come across his ideas during his period of study at the Moscow Conservatory.

In the early twentieth century Vincent d'Indy made a notable reference to the subject in his *Cours de composition musicale* from 1909:

Force and energy, concision and clarity: such are almost invariably the essential *masculine* characteristics belonging to the *first idea*: it imposes itself in the *brusque rhythms*, affirming very nobly its tonal ownership, one and definitive.

The *second idea*, in contrast, entirely gentle and of *melodic* grace, is affective almost always by means of its verbosity and modulatory vagueness of the eminently alluring *feminine*: supple and elegant, it spreads out progressively the curve of its ornamented melody; circumscribed more or less clearly in a neighbouring tonality in the course of the exposition, it will always depart from it in the recapitulation, in order to adopt the first tonality occupied from the beginning by the dominant masculine element alone (p. 136).

D'Indy, in the same text, also refers to the development section as a 'battle', in which the feminine ultimately has to submit to the masculine. A comparison may be drawn between D'Indy's description, in which sonata-form is interpreted as an abstract interaction between two opposing and contrasting forces, and the idea of music as having a narrative. Susan McClary refers to this in the following terms, drawing on similar narrative paradigms as found in Russian literature: 'the masculine protagonist makes contact with but must eventually subjugate ... the designated [feminine] in order for identity to be consolidated, for the sake of satisfactory narrative closure' (1991, p. 14).⁶⁴

Scriabin's use of sonata-form, when understood in terms of the gender roles symbolised in the *Prefatory Act*, display some striking differences with the above quoted perceptions of gender and form. Whereas the likes of D'Indy and Reimann portray the feminine second subject theme as subordinate and ultimately overpowered by the masculine, as represented by the recapitulation of the second subject in the tonic key, Scriabin depicts the Feminine Principle as a far more powerful and complex character. Whilst she is less active than the Masculine Principle and an image of

⁶⁴ See also de Lauretis (1986, pp.118-119).

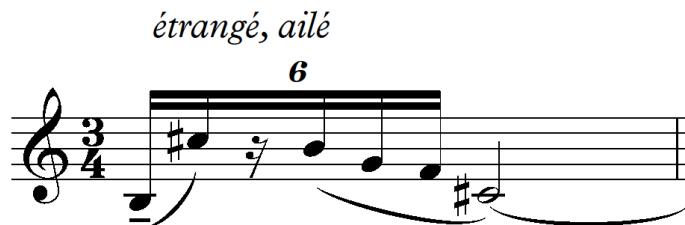
beauty, she is also dangerously seductive and a symbol of the Masculine Principle's desire and the reason for his active character, the darker side of which leads to death and all its initial horror. Whilst not described as visibly 'active' – in the way the Masculine Principle is depicted as 'fiery' and 'winged' – the Feminine is verbally active, essentially giving the Masculine Principle instructions in the opening dialogue on where his path to her lies.

Within the context of nineteenth-century Russian literature, Scriabin's presentation of gender roles in the *Prefatory Act* is complex, in some respects similar, in others unusual. The notion of the feminine as passive and the masculine as more active was a common way of portraying male and female gender roles in literature of the time – such as in works by Dostoevsky; in a similar way, feminine characters tend to be presented as objects of desire – femininity is defined in relation to masculine desire.⁶⁵ Whilst Scriabin retains many of these connotations of masculine-feminine gender roles, his portrayal of the Feminine Principle is in a sense far more empowering, presenting her as destructive to the Masculine Principle, or as 'fate the destroyer' (Ivanov, 1909). Whilst these notions of gender role are likely to seem outdated within the context of modern day perceptions, what is most relevant here is how these particular characteristics, within the context of the music of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, may have become associated with certain types of harmonic and melodic patterns, and how we judge such a connection to be of use in practice today.

From a performance perspective, I have found that considering the sonata-form structure of the Sixth Sonata as in some way representative of masculine-feminine

⁶⁵ Teresa de Lauretis comments on Freud's question of 'What does a woman want?', suggesting that what Freud was really asking was 'what is femininity – for men?' (1984, p. 111). The notion of Freudian desire in relation to Scriabin's harmonic language is developed at length by Smith (2010, 2013), and will be discussed in section 3.5.

dualism has led me to more clearly define the characteristics I attach to certain themes. A significant example is the following figure found near the beginning of the sonata, which is accompanied by Scriabin's description 'strange, winged':



Example 3.1

Before carrying out my research into this work, I had always found this a difficult melodic idea to convey, due to its strange and awkward melodic shape and angular rhythm. My initial approach in practice was to try and 'bring out' the strangeness of its character, taking time over the rising 9th, so as to exaggerate the melodic shape, and my tempo choice in the opening section at that time was far slower. Given Scriabin's 'winged' description, I now think of this figure as connected to the character of the Masculine Principle; far more active and impulsive. The result of which – as will be discussed further in Chapter 5 – is a far quicker choice of tempo, since I now consider the overall shape of the 'winged' figure as being a rising major 2nd, making a crescendo to the final C#. I would argue that this creates a far greater sense of the impulsiveness of the Masculine Principle's character, the 'strangeness' being contained in the melodic shape that Scriabin writes and so needing little exaggeration.

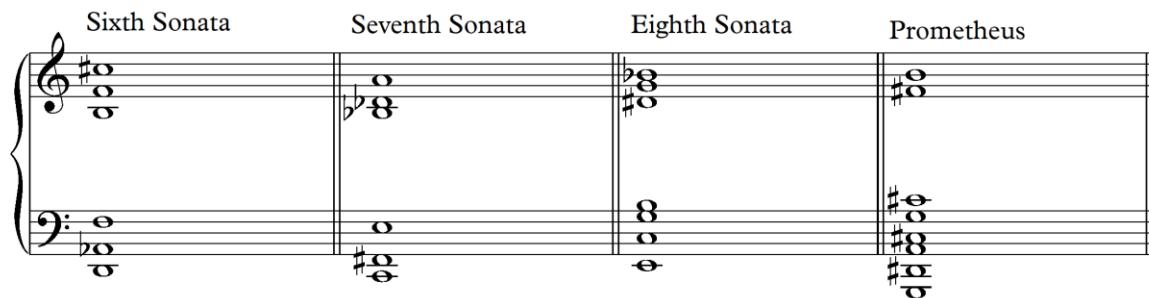
In a similar way, the complex nature of Scriabin's Feminine Principle has led me to re-evaluate certain aspects of the second subject area of the Sixth Sonata, which I have come to interpret as representing not just the beauty of the Feminine Principle, but also her seductive and dangerous facets, hints of which may be found

in the music – a comprehensive exploration of which is given in Chapter 5. Whilst it may be possible to reach these interpretations without undertaking such research, for me it has been an invaluable process, during which my speculations regarding Scriabin's notions of gender, character, and their relation to sonata-form, have been vindicated through what I judge to be a far more successful interpretation in practice at this particular time. The theoretical interpretations I have developed during this process found their justification only as I applied their practical implications, as I understood them, to my artistic work. Such is the nature of practice-led research – if it is to have artistic value, any finding of research needs to have a bearing in some way on practice.

3.3 The tritone and the mystic chord as a possible symbol of unity and desire

In the following section I explore some of the existing analyses and perceptions pertaining to Scriabin's mystic chord and late-period harmony in general. I also comment on the absence of performance practice from many of the currently available analyses, and attempt to demonstrate how practice may be influential with regard to forming and judging analytical conclusions. I put forward my own thoughts regarding how I hear Scriabin's mystic chord within a wider context, and how such an understanding may have a wider performative impact in Scriabin's late music.

All of Scriabin's late piano works may be understood as harmonically based on a version of the mystic chord, and whilst the form of the chord used varies, all display similar properties, being made up predominantly of 4ths and 5ths, from as little as four to as many as seven different pitches. The versions which open the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Sonatas, as well as *Prometheus Op. 60*, are shown below:



Example 3.2

Many arguments exist as to how this type of harmony should be analytically understood, as well as how the resulting harmonies that Scriabin draws from it function; ranging from the perception of the chord as a musical symbol of mystic unity (Garcia 2000, Gawboy 2001, Taruskin 1985), to attempts to understand its function through psycho-analytic theories of Drive and Desire (Smith 2010, 2013). Other investigations are purely analytical (Perlé 1984, Wai-Ling 1986, Dernova 1968, Sabbagh 2003) and don't comment on any potential relationship between Scriabin's harmonic world and his philosophical exploits, whereas others, especially Baker (1986), have sought to actively infer that Scriabin's philosophical outlooks are inconsequential to analysis.⁶⁶ None of the above analyses are practice-led, and neither do they comment on how their work may relate to the act of performance, however it is clear that they do not set out to do so.

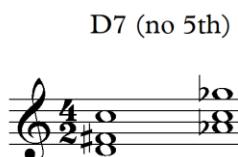
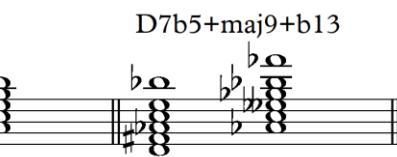
Despite the lack of discussion pertaining to performance practice in the aforementioned analyses, some may offer ideas of use, in particular those that comment on the way we may hear the mystic chord, and how this may relate to extra-musical concepts. One such approach is offered by Susanna Garcia, who suggests

⁶⁶ It should be noted that this applies to Baker's earlier work on Scriabin, he has since written *Scriabin's Music: Structure as Prism for Mystical Philosophy* (1997) which does embrace a connection between Scriabin's music and philosophy.

that from *Prometheus* onwards ‘the “mystic” chord functions as a generative force, a potential energy, and an unrevealed mystery that directs the entire work’ (2000, p. 277). In relation to the late piano sonatas, Garcia goes on to state that ‘[i]n these works, it [the mystic chord] is the characteristic structure, unfolding at the opening of each sonata, that analogizes mystical unity, for it is the source from which all melodic and harmonic structures derive’ (2000, p. 277). This is an understanding that I share, the reasons for which I will now explore through a closer examination of the way in which the mystic chord emerged as the defining harmonic feature of Scriabin’s late music.

3.4 Dernova’s tritone-link and Scriabin’s colour hearing

The mystic chord may have developed out of Scriabin’s predilection for the construction of ever more complex dominant 7th related harmonies and Varvara Dernova (1973) proposed that the different forms of the mystic chord are created by a juxtaposition of two dominant 7th type harmonies related by a tritone, termed the ‘tritone link’. The resulting mystic chord harmony displays little, if any, invariance when transposed by a tritone, the level of invariance depending on the type of dominant chords that are juxtaposed. The following shows four different dominant 7th related harmonies and their tritone counterparts, the letter ‘D’ here refers to dominant, rather than the root note:

D7 (no 5th)	D7b5	D7b5+b9	D7b5+maj9+b13
			

Example 3.3

As can be seen, the D7b5 and the D7b5+maj9+b13 show no invariance when transposed by a tritone, whilst the other two harmonies show one note of invariance; the D7b5 harmony is effectively a juxtaposition of the two D7 chords with no fifth, shown on the left.⁶⁷ The consequence of understanding the mystic chord in this way is that there are two possible root notes, related by a tritone, a point which is the basis of much of Smith's work, in which he connects this multiple potential for resolution to psychoanalytical drives and desire (2010, 2013).

In my view, one of the most important hints that Scriabin left regarding his own concept of the mystic chord, and from which we may learn a great deal, is found in the way transpositions of the 'Promethean' version of the mystic chord are linked to certain colours. During the preparations for the performance of *Prometheus Op. 60*, Scriabin invented an instrument which would project different colours when different notes were played, these are included in a 'luce' part in the score.⁶⁸ Transpositions of the chord on C, D, E, G, A and B are represented by the primary colours of the visual spectrum, whereas transpositions based on Db, Eb, F, F#, Ab, and Bb are connected with colours outside of the visible spectrum, such as 'infra-red' and 'ultra-violet' (Myers, 1914, p. 114). An area which has not been considered, to my knowledge, in the research literature, is that in this particular description of Scriabin's colour association the colours of the visible spectrum are 'material' colours, whereas the others are beyond the visible spectrum, and are perhaps therefore linked to the 'immaterial' or 'spiritual'; this may be understood as related to Schopenhauer's phenomenal and

⁶⁷ It should be noted that although the previous examples display a way in which mystic chords might be formed, Scriabin usually arranges the pitches in a different order, most commonly in intervals of 4^{ths} or 5^{ths}.

⁶⁸ Regarding Scriabin's 'colour-hearing' and possible synesthesia, in an interview during Scriabin's time performing in London, Charles Myers writes that 'in general, when listening to music, he [Scriabin] has only a 'feeling' of colour; only in cases where the feeling is very intense does it pass over to give an 'image' of colour' (1914, p.8).

noumenal, or Ivanov's *a realibus ad realiora* – from the real to the more real – as discussed in Chapter 2.

What is significant regarding Scriabin's colour association is that any two tritone-related transpositions of the Promethean chord are associated respectively with one material and one immaterial colour. Even though Scriabin's colour scheme refers to transpositions of the Promethean mystic chord rather than individual pitches, because of the low level of invariance at the transposition of the tritone, chords that are a tritone apart are most closely linked in terms of pitch content. In this sense the mystic chord may be understood as a microcosm of Scriabin's broader harmonic symbolism, representing a *unification of opposites*, connected via the interval of the tritone, leading to what Scriabin termed the 'polarity of the tritone', in which the tritone represents two opposing, but linked, forces.⁶⁹

It may be argued that polarity also refers to the intrinsic relationship between harmony and melody, and the way in which a harmony may be 'polarised' depending on the relation of pitches between the two, an example of which may be found in the second subject area of the Seventh Sonata, bars 29-31:⁷⁰

Example 3.4

⁶⁹ In her analysis and exploration of *Prometheus*, Anna Gawboy has suggested that Scriabin's tritone polarity may have a direct link to Theosophy, and more specifically is a musical symbol of the Theosophical notion of 'Akasa' - a vibration, or energy that Blavatsky depicted as a force that initiated the evolutionary process. Akasa has a dual nature, both spiritual and material (2010).

⁷⁰ Scriabin reportedly said to Sabaneev that 'harmony becomes melody and melody becomes harmony. For me there is no difference between melody and harmony' (Sabaneev, 1925, p. 47).

Here is an enharmonically different realization and reduction of the same passage, which may be closer to what we actually hear:

Example 3.5

To my ear, the harmony begins more closely related to Ab (G# in Scriabin's original), with the melodic A (perhaps better represented enharmonically as Bbb) 'resolving' onto the major ninth Bb. As the melodic line progresses it causes a subtle shift in how we hear the underlying harmony: as it moves from F to D to F# (F, Cx, F# in the original) I hear the F as a minor third relating to D, which then 'resolves' to the major third F#, the melody 'polarising' the harmony towards D. What is crucial in this analysis is that this deduction is only possible if we play this passage, and not just a reduction either, but the full score and, vitally, with the effect of the sustaining pedal.

When the full texture is heard and the sound sustained, the G# in the left hand accompaniment – bar 29, beat 2 – is heard just before the entry of the A in the upper melodic line. The two-note slur over the left hand G#’s, as well as the fact that the G# – which is heard just before the melody A – is played with the thumb, draws attention to the compound minor 9th ‘clash’ that will be heard between accompaniment and melody in practice. It is this interval which results in the following melodic A# (Bb) sounding more ‘resolved’; the interval changing from minor to major. If heard enharmonically, a similar minor-major ‘resolution’ may be inferred between the E#-F#

(F-F#), in bar 31. This is an instance where Scriabin's choice of orthography doesn't clearly relate to my own practice-led interpretation, which is based on my own process of *analytical listening*.

3.5 Harmony and desire

Another interpretation of Scriabin's harmonic language which has been primarily championed by Kenneth Smith, is the notion that his harmony can be understood as relating to the psycho-analytic notion of Drive and Desire. Smith takes as his starting point Scriabin's own suggestion that most of his 'musical poems have a specific psychological content' (Bowers, 1974, p. 108) and draws on Freud and Lacan in his exploration of a possible psychoanalytical reading of Scriabin's late music. Whilst Smith acknowledges that Freud only published his monumental paper on Drives in 1915, the year of Scriabin's death, he suggests that Scriabin may have intuitively captured some of its key ideas, perhaps due to both Freud and Scriabin being exposed to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*.

Smith's work rests on his notion that the mystic chord 'can be conceived as a polytonal network of at least two dominant-seventh configurations which embody drives in divergent keys' (2010, p. 241) and suggests that such an understanding 'affords a refreshingly conservative environment in which to analyse Skryabin's music amid a climate of whole-tone/octatonic and even proto-serial explanations' (2010, p. 242).⁷¹ What Smith ultimately suggests, and with which I agree, is that Scriabin's harmonic language is 'delicately poised between the diatonic, the octatonic, the whole-tone, the mystic, and so on, yet resists confinement to any single set' (2010, p. 243).

⁷¹ For explorations of Scriabin's possible use of the octatonic scale see Perle, *Scriabin self-analyses* (1984), Wai-Ling (1993, pp.47-69 and 1996), and Taruskin (1985, pp. 72-142).

A central criticism I have of Smith's work is his tendency to make assumptions on the part of the listener, without considering the potential variance in sound that exists between performances, as well as the role practice may play in forming interpretative constructs. He suggests, for instance, that a listener is capable of hearing two tonics within a single chord, which may well be possible, but I would argue that hearing a chord in this way rests on the way it is played, and that the performance of this chord would have to exhibit certain qualities regarding voicing to make such a hearing possible. These criticisms largely extend from Smith's sole focus on harmony and score-based analysis, an approach that I have already been critical of.

Although Smith does not question the way the sound of a chord, or chords, can be varied in different performances, his approach does produce a multitude of possible analytical readings, as he claims: '... it [his approach] closely charts many possible mechanisms of hearing a passage without seizing on just one particular route through a sound pattern and proclaiming it as gospel' (2010, p. 256). In comparison, Anna Gawboy seems wary of an approach yielding multitudinous analytical readings, suggesting that the problem is that Scriabin's music is 'too amenable to analysis' (2010, p. 15). She advocates, as does Garcia, an approach in which Scriabin's philosophy is used as a value system for judging analytical results:

If Scriabin's philosophical ideas were truly integrated in the analytic process, the ideas – as a system of values – would ultimately have an impact on the manner in which the *musical relationships* were conceptualized and articulated (2010, p. 33).

Whilst I agree that Scriabin's philosophy may be useful with regard to a deeper understanding of particular musical patterns, what Gawboy misses is that the very fact that Scriabin's music yields a multitude of analytical readings says something about the nature and the sound of his music; as Smith shows, his harmonies have the potential to be *heard* in many different ways. What is significant from my perspective

in both Gawboy's and Smith's work is the lack of consideration for the role that practice may play in *determining* how these sounds might be heard differently, instead employing methods which are primarily score-led, rather than practice-led. For me, it is performance which provides the value system for judging the merits of an analytical thought. The justification for my argument that certain musical phenomena may represent certain aspects of the *Prefatory Act* resides in my judgement from a performance perspective, based on how these phenomena actually sound when played in a certain way, that similar qualities are potential in the musical material as are portrayed by the 'characters' of the libretto and that it can be demonstrated that such characteristics are valuable interpretative tools in practice. I would argue that such a judgement can be reached only through employing practice and not merely through score-based analysis.

3.6 Desire and the dominant 7th – how should we *hear* Scriabin's mystic chord?

Whilst Smith doesn't take into account the effect that texture, melodic shape, and ultimately practice might have on our listening experience – and I am not entirely convinced by Smith's overemphasis on purely harmonic analysis – it is certainly not inconceivable that Scriabin may have symbolised desire through musical means, especially with regard to its presence in Scriabin's interpretation of Theosophy and the *Prefatory Act* libretto, as explored in Chapter 2. Smith's notion of desire rests on the perception of the tritone as an unstable interval needing, or 'desiring' resolution. In fact this 'need' for resolution is our own cultural construct, established within the context of a significant amount of Western Classical music.⁷² The question here then is how we

⁷² The rhetoric of desire in relation to tonal relations is much older, for example Jacques de Liège, a fourteenth-century contrapuntal theorist, describes imperfect intervals as 'striving to attain' more perfect

are able to hear Scriabin's harmonic world: can we approach it as a completely new system, one that challenges the preconceptions fundamental to diatonicism, or do we choose to hear it, at least to some extent, within the context of nineteenth-century perceptions of tonality?

This question has important implications when it comes to the way Scriabin ends his late sonatas, which is always on some sort of dominant 7th derived harmony. Kivy comments that 'if a composer writes ... music that avoids closure, "restless" music – part of its effect lies, of course, in its being projected against a background of the enduring tradition of music in the rest-tension-release mode' (2002, p. 94), he goes on to describe the release of this tension onto 'restful' chords as 'historically relative' and that 'syntax in music ... changes with time' (2002, p. 95). The question which follows this statement is whether it is possible to hear a dominant 7th derived harmony, such as the mystic chord, as 'restful' or as a resolution, or do we accept that Scriabin's harmonic world must be understood in relation to concepts of nineteenth-century dominant function?

It seems to me, based on my experience of immersing myself in Scriabin's late music during a period of intense practice, that it may be possible to start hearing dissonant formations, such as the mystic chord, as providing some form of resolution, thereby shifting our deeply rooted experience of tonal functions. Hearing it thus as part of a completely new system of harmony, we might suggest that the mystic chord is intended to sound as a resolution; heard as a development of pre-existing concepts of

intervals (Cohen 2001, 164). Similar Ugolino of Orvieto, describes in the fifteenth century a dissonant interval as imperfect, compared to a consonant one, and as 'ardently [burning] to attain that perfection' (Cohen 2001, 164). In this respect dissonant intervals are understood as *desiring* consonance. This notion is expounded by Schenker in his influential organicist model of tonal theory stating that 'we must even comprehend dissonance merely as determined by consonance and thus recognize the consonance of nature alone as the ultimate ground and at the same time the final goal of everything transitional and striving' (Schenker 1921-24, 3).

harmony and tritone function, Scriabin's final 'cadences' are left open, sounding possibly 'unfinished'. Such a choice has further, vital, implications in practice: if we perceive these closing harmonies as 'resolutions' within a new harmonic system, how are we best to convey this through performative means, and conversely, if understood as 'open-ended', what performative values must our interpretation exude, and how is this judged to be effective?

During my research, I have come to the conclusion – as Smith suggests – that Scriabin's harmonic world is multi-faceted and it is not necessary to try and sum it up with regard to a single 'system'. I believe that certain, specific, harmonies may be associated with certain aspects of character, emotion and mood, as represented in the *Prefatory Act* – these will be discussed in the following section – but at the same time I would advocate that it is most appropriate and helpful to hear and understand Scriabin's harmony within the context of nineteenth-century romanticism, in which the dominant 7th harmony becomes both a partial resolution – due to the greater complexity of other harmonies – and a constant source of ongoing desire and longing.

Examples of the use of dominant 7th related, or more 'dissonant' harmonies, to portray longing and desire are plentiful in nineteenth-century romanticism. The notion of longing, or the German 'Sehnsucht', permeates the literature and poetry of the time and has been conveyed musically by composers such as Schubert, Schumann and Wagner, and it is within this context that we can perhaps better understand how and why we might *hear* desire in Scriabin's mystic chord. A well-cited example is Wagner's 'Tristan' chord:



Example 3.6

The notion that this chord symbolises Tristan and Isolde's longing for each other, and ultimately for death, is well-known; it is a harmony which 'resolves' onto a dominant 7th chord, only then is its relationship to a sense of key suggested. The sense of resolution, though incomplete, is perhaps enhanced by Wagner's stressing of the 'Tristan' chord, and the diminuendo into the E7 chord which follows.

Kivy suggests that our perception of the Tristan chord is culturally bound, describing its beauty as a 'cultural artefact' of the nineteenth-century, which would not have been understood in the same way – i.e. as beautiful, or as relating to notions of desire – in the context of the music of the eighteenth-century (2002, p. 85). The same claim may be made of Scriabin's mystic chord; ultimately the way we hear and understand this harmony is in relation to its cultural context, i.e. in its relation to the harmony of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, and especially to the towering, and lasting influence of Wagner.

As with Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, a crucial extra dimension to our understanding of the mystic chord lies in what we know regarding the nature of Scriabin's philosophy, and in particular the themes of desire and eroticism. In this respect I would argue that the dominant 7th element of the 'mystic' chord requires us to hear this harmony within the context of Wagner's use of dissonant and dominant-related harmonies as a means of expressing desire. I will explore the influence of

Wagner further in Chapter 5, in relation to both composer's musical depiction of femininity and seduction.

Other examples of longing in nineteenth-century music can be heard in the music of Schumann, who was one of the few composers that Scriabin expressed a genuine enthusiasm for – the story goes that during one of his performance classes at the Moscow Conservatoire, a student brought Schumann's *Davidsbündlertanze*, and Scriabin was so enthused by the work that he sat down to demonstrate and ended up playing through the work twice. Below are two examples of the use of dominant 7th related harmonies by Schumann which may be heard as creating a feeling, and the sound of longing:



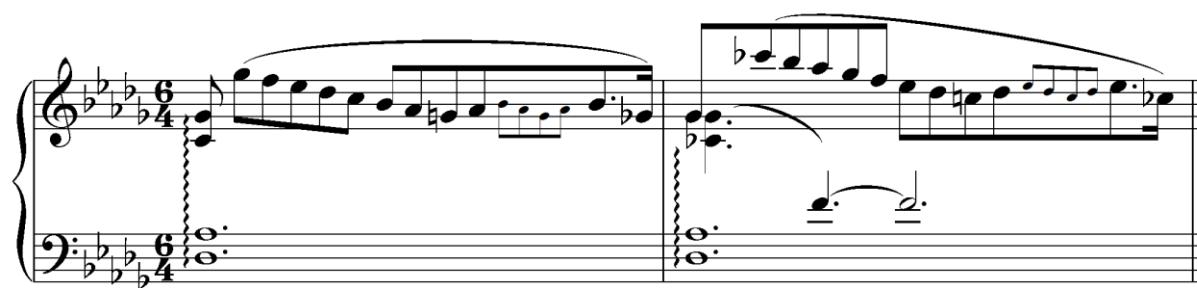
Example 3.7

A musical score for a piano piece. The top staff shows a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps, and common time. The bottom staff shows a bass clef, a key signature of two sharps, and common time. The music consists of a single melodic line in the treble clef staff. There are several grace notes and slurs. A dynamic marking 'p' (piano) is present. The harmonic progression includes changes from G major to D major and back to G major.

Example 3.8

The first is the ending of the opening song of *Dichterliebe*, which ends on an unresolved chord of C#7 – the following song beginning in A major – and this would seem to reflect the last lines of the poem, which read as follows: ‘Da hab’ ich ihr gestanden / Mein Sehnen und verlangen – Then it was I confessed to her / My longing and desire’. The second example comes from a movement in *Davidsbündlertanze*, which is perhaps connected with Schumann’s character of ‘Eusebius’, and in which I perceive a sense of longing or desire, created through the delaying of tonic resolution into B minor until the very end of the movement, along with the repeated figuration and texture in each bar, melodic appoggiaturas, limited variance of dynamic, and pedal notes in the bass.

Further examples of a similar method of portrayal of harmonic desire by Schumann and Scriabin may be construed in the following four cases, which I have drawn from the ends of movements or works by both composers. The first two are by Schumann – the first from the extended piano coda to the last song of *Dichterliebe*, the second from the end of the first movement of the C major *Fantasie*:



Example 3.9

Example 3.10

The next two examples are the closing harmonies of Scriabin's *Etude, op. 56 no.4*, and *Désir, Op.57 no. 1*, respectively:

Example 3.11

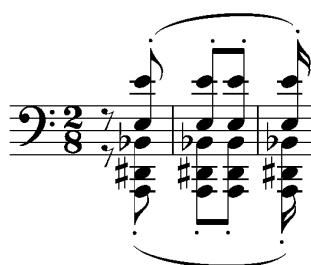
Example 3.12

All of these harmonies may be understood as dominant 7th based harmonies over a tonic bass. Whereas Schumann uses these harmonies to delay tonic resolution, Scriabin ends his compositions on these harmonies, perhaps implying that the longing and desire is unresolved and continues beyond the music. This is a similar

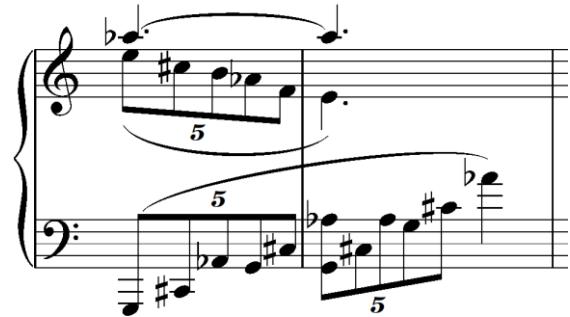
understanding to that of Yuri Khopolov, who suggests that if ‘a dominant-formed sonority completely loses its gravitation, it ceases to be a dominant, though it still has a striving and strained character’ (1993, p. 16). This concept would seem in keeping with Scriabin’s plan for the composition of a musical prelude – the *Prefatory Act* – as separate from the process of spiritual transformation – the *Mysterium*. To me, this is evidence that Scriabin had realized the problem of composing music for an event which was to take place beyond consciousness, and in this respect the ending of works with harmonies that imply further, ongoing, longing and desire is justified, as the true ‘resolution’ can only come through a spiritual experience which lies beyond the phenomenal world of music.

3.7 Chords ‘within’ the mystic chord: further examples of polarity and unity

So far I have explored the general notion of the mystic chord as a musical symbol of material-spiritual polarity, unity and desire. Further, more specific examples of harmonic symbolism may be drawn from examining the forms in which the mystic chord is found throughout Scriabin’s late music as a whole. In this regard, it is possible to speculate that certain mystic chord harmonies share intervallic and timbral commonalities, as well as similar extra-musical associations, as inferred from Scriabin’s score descriptions. One such harmony can be seen in several guises below:



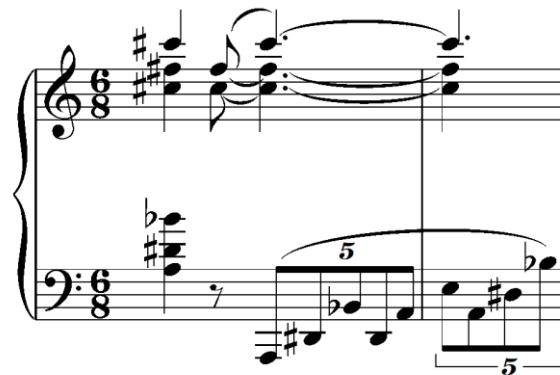
Example 3.13: Sonata No. 6, bars 114-116



Example 3.14: Seventh Sonata, bars 103-104, marked *avec trouble*



Example 3.15: *Poème-Nocturne* Op. 61, bar 99



Example 3.16: *Poème*, Op. 71, no. 1

These are four comparable sounding harmonies – as used in the Sonata No. 6, Sonata No. 7, *Poème-nocturne* and the *Poème* op. 71 no. 1 – the similarity relating particularly

to the intervals which make up the left hand chords and arpeggios – Aug4th, Dim6th, minor 9th and sometimes another Aug4th. In each instance Scriabin also alludes to something sinister or ominous in his performance descriptions: in the Sixth Sonata writing ‘the horror surges forward’, in the Seventh Sonata *avec trouble*, and in the *Poème-nocturne* simply ‘ominous’. There are other instances of this harmony in other late works, but with no accompanying description; in these instances it may be possible to infer a similar allusion to the more sinister and terrifying aspects of his philosophy. This reasoning is justified partly because in practice I judge these chords as *sounding* sinister, based partly on their intervallic content, including the minor 9th and tritone, as well as the fact that they are often heard in the lower register of the piano. Such a connection has implications in practice, particularly regarding voicing. I discuss at length in Chapter 5 how this correlation has led me to carefully consider how to most effectively voice these harmonies in practice – particularly when this type of harmony is ‘suggested’ but not written in full – frequently voicing out the minor 9th interval in order to create a ‘darker’, more ominous sound.

Another such harmony that may be understood through a similar process is the simple dominant 7th or 9th harmony. These chords do not function as ‘dominants’ – I am using the term simply for identification – and, given the complexity of much of Scriabin’s mystic chord derived harmony, a simple dominant 7th chord may be heard as having greater clarity of sound than more complex, dominant derived harmonies. I have come to consider the simple dominant 7th/9th as being associated with moments of purity and beauty, as extra-musically symbolised by the Feminine Principle, for instance in the following two examples from the Sixth and Ninth Sonatas, bars 39-41 and 37-42 respectively:



Example 3.17

Example 3.18

Both examples are taken from the second subject area and in each case the underlying harmony is a relatively simple dominant 7th or major triad harmony. Scriabin writes in the score at this point in the Sixth Sonata ‘the dream takes shape (purity, beauty, clarity)’, and reportedly said of the second subject of the Ninth Sonata that it was a ‘slumbering, holy entity, surrounded by evil spells’ (Sabaneev, 1925, p. 162). I have approached Sabaneev’s account here with a certain caution, especially considering that this text, in which he recounts what are presented as Scriabin’s own

words about his compositions, dates from ten years after Scriabin's death. Despite this wariness, if a connection lies between these two second subject themes and the Feminine Principle, then Scriabin's description of 'purity' in Sonata No. 6 does still need further explanation, particularly if it is to be upheld that the Feminine also has a seductive and dangerous side to her character. One explanation may be found in the connection between the Feminine Principle and death. If the Feminine, as presented in Scriabin's libretto, is associated with matter, death may be understood as a material manifestation of the fundamental Feminine Principle, as death is a material concept. Death is initially viewed by those in the material world – such as the hero – as barbaric and terrifying. In this respect, Scriabin's 'Holy entity', and description of 'purity' in the Sixth Sonata, relates to the purely spiritual nature of the fundamental Feminine Principle, and the 'evil spells' relate to the Feminine Principle's appearance in the material world as the 'horrid face of death'; Scriabin's philosophy seems to suggest that the emergence of the Feminine Principle as material death is a necessary part of the spirit's evolutionary process.

The linking of the above two themes with the complex character of the Feminine Principle may be further supported by their melodic content, as well as the way in which Scriabin transforms these themes in both works. In the final bar of the above example from the Ninth Sonata, Scriabin alludes rhythmically to an earlier theme which is far more sinister and ominous in sound and character, first accompanied by one of the 'darker' harmonies from the mystic chord, as previously discussed:

Musical score for piano, measures 11-12. The score consists of three staves. The top staff is treble clef, 4/8 time, and B-flat key signature. The middle staff is bass clef, 4/8 time, and B-flat key signature. The bottom staff is bass clef, 4/8 time, and B-flat key signature. Measure 11 starts with a whole rest followed by a sixteenth-note pattern: B-flat, A, C, B-flat. Measure 12 begins with a fermata over a sixteenth-note pattern: B-flat, A, C, B-flat, followed by a eighth-note G, a sixteenth-note F-sharp, and a sixteenth-note E. The dynamic instruction *mysterieusement murmure* is placed above the middle staff.

Example 3.19

Similarly in the Sixth Sonata, Scriabin introduces a two note ‘spell’ motif into the second subject area, which later becomes integrated into the ‘rising’ theme, first heard in bar 39:

A musical score for piano solo in G major, 3/4 time. The melody is composed of eighth and sixteenth notes, starting with a forte dynamic (f). The word "Charmes" is written below the staff.

Example 3.20

A musical score in 3/4 time, treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp. The melody begins at G and descends through B-flat, A-sharp, A-sharp, B-sharp, and C-sharp, ending at B-flat. The notes are connected by a single curved brace.

Example 3.21

The transformation which takes place in the second subject area of the Sixth Sonata will be explored at length in Chapter 5, in particular with regard to the consequences this understanding of Scriabin's score descriptions has had for me in practice. In

particular I have found that the interpretation of this section as something which begins ‘pure’ but, as it gradually becomes more and more seductive, becomes dangerous and more sinister, has influenced the way I characterize the music in performance in response to the complexity of this character. For example I have come to connect the repeated chords in bars 41-42 of the Sixth Sonata as a subtle reference to the terrifying bells which emerge at bars 114-116, this has resulted in a reconsideration of voicing, inflection and timing in bars 41-42, so as to allude to a more ominous sense of character.

The different mystic chord harmonies that I have described above are used by Scriabin as a way of creating a ‘sound character’ for each of the main sections of Sonata No. 6; the three distinct and contrasting subject areas that I perceive are each based around a different version of the ‘mystic’ chord:

1st subj. 2nd subj. 3rd subj.

Example 3.22

Whilst I am certainly not suggesting that there is a sense of major/minor key in this work, each of these versions of the mystic chord may be described as having ‘major’ or ‘minor’ qualities. The second subject harmony sounds major, as it contains a major triad, whereas the third subject harmony – or the ‘horror’ chord, as I will later refer to

it – is ‘minor’ sounding as it contains no major intervals and two minor 9ths. Interestingly, Scriabin is reported to have said that ‘[t]he minor mode is ... based on undertones. It goes *down*, and is weighted down all the time. It is regression, the downfall into materialism’ (Sabaneev, 1925, pp. 227-228).⁷³ This would seem to support the notion that ‘darker’ and more ominous harmonies found in the 6th Sonata represent the material manifestation of the Feminine Principle in the guise of ‘material’ death.

The first subject area harmony is harder to pin down, its sound quality relating directly to how it is voiced in practice; though this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, the effect lies in the fact that it is preceded at the opening by a grace note chord in which the right hand thumb plays the B, and the left hand contains a rising semitone which leads to the Ab. As a result the B and Ab, along with the bass D, which is repeated in octaves immediately after, are more prominent, the resulting sound closer to that of a diminished 7th chord, the greater ambiguity perhaps helping to define it as ‘mysterious’, as found in Scriabin’s accompanying description:

Modéré
mystérieux, concentré

Example 3.23

I will explore in Chapter 5 how my understanding of the three harmonies presented

⁷³ It is quite possible that Scriabin came upon this notion in the theories of Riemann which were widely taught at the time, see Rehding (2009) – major intervals are explained as related to the ‘overtone’ series, minor to the ‘undertone’ series – the notion of an ‘undertone’ series has since been discredited.

above as representing mystic unity, purity and horror respectively, has led me to consider the harmony of the Sixth Sonata as symbolising an extra-musical narrative, as well as the way this interpretation has caused me to reconsider specific aspects of musical character, in relation to such practice concerns as voicing, inflection, timing, tempo and texture. I will also discuss the role practice has played in my emerging interpretation, with particular regard to the way a chord – such as the opening harmony of the Sixth Sonata – is physically laid out on the keyboard.

Chapter 4: Sonata-form revisited: Mystic circles and musical structure

In the previous chapter I have explored the potential link between the *Prefatory Act* libretto and certain harmonic and melodic elements common to much of Scriabin's late music. In this chapter, I suggest ways in which this musical symbolism may be further embedded in Scriabin's use of a sonata-form as well as smaller-scale harmonic patterns in the Sixth Sonata. A key connection between particular musical patterns and the libretto is the shape of the circle, as found throughout Scriabin's *Prefatory Act* and in Theosophy. My re-evaluation of Scriabin's idiosyncratic employment of sonata-form as circular has led me to question certain aspects of this work in practice. I will also suggest how the shape of the circle may relate to notions of desire – as discussed in the previous chapter – and how this concept has caused me to further rethink how I understand Scriabin's harmonic language from a listener's perspective.

4.1 Theosophy and the Circle – Seven Chains, Rounds, Globes and Races

In the previous two chapters, I discussed the notions of duality and opposition as central themes in the *Prefatory Act* libretto, suggesting ways in which they may be musically symbolised, one such way being the association of the Masculine and Feminine Principles with the first and second subject areas of sonata-form. A further way in which Scriabin's adaptation of sonata-form may mirror the *Prefatory Act* libretto – especially with regard to the text's links with Theosophy – lies in the significance of the circle as a theosophical symbol of evolution, as well as a fundamental concept of musical composition. I explore this connection by first offering a more detailed discussion of theosophical cyclic evolution, and giving examples of how Scriabin may

allude to this notion throughout the *Prefatory Act* text. I then explore specific musical examples from the Sixth Sonata in this context.

The Eschatology of theosophical dogma is complex and multifaceted, and therefore doesn't lend itself well to brief description. At its heart it is a synthesis of Eastern religions, as expounded in Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), a book which Scriabin owned and read avidly, and which explains the evolution of the spirit through an ongoing cyclic process of reincarnation. Figure 4.1 is taken from *The Secret Doctrine*, and is a diagrammatic representation of part of this process:

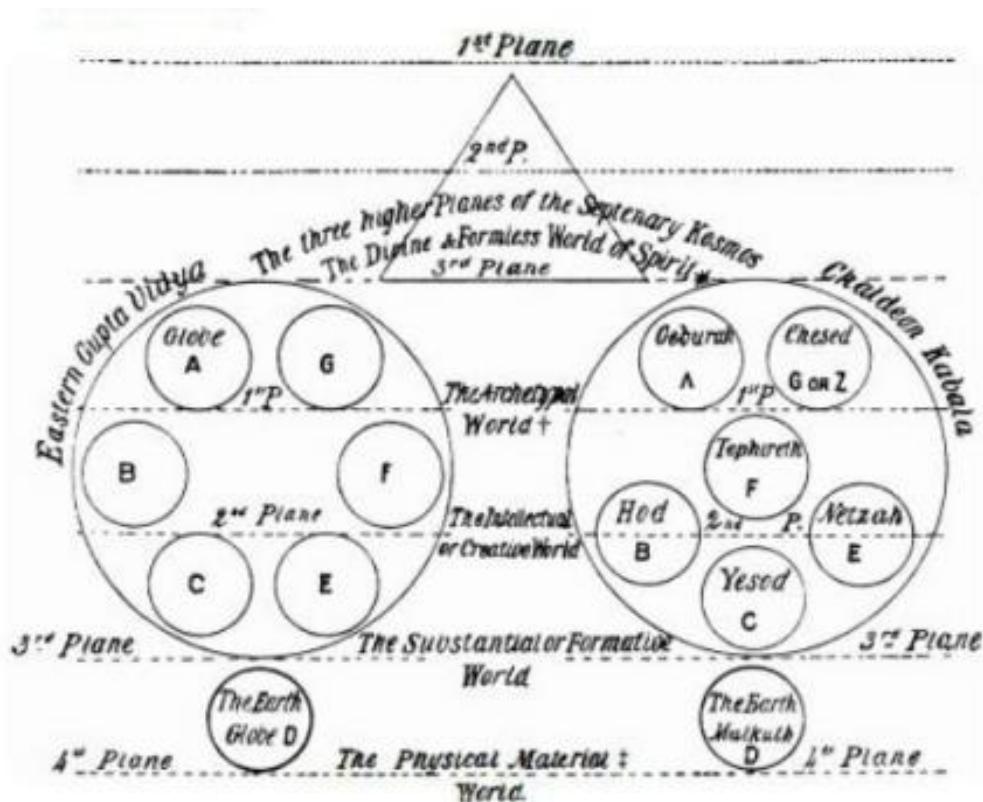


Figure 4.1

Everything about this process is sevenfold. Firstly, according to Blavatsky, we can exist in seven different planes, the upper three are purely spiritual – ‘the formless world of spirit’, as seen above. The lower four planes lead down to the embodiment of

consciousness in the 4th Plane, in which we currently exist. The movement of the spirit from the higher spiritual state to the lower physical state is described as the evolution of the ‘life wave’.

The circles on the left hand side of the diagram above represent a single Planetary Chain, which itself is made up of Seven Globes, labeled A-G. The life wave passes seven times through each Planetary Chain – known as the Seven Rounds – and there are seven Planetary Chains in total, so 49 Rounds. The ‘Earth’ planetary chain is the 4th chain in the sequence, and is made up of Seven Globes, see Figure 4.2 below:

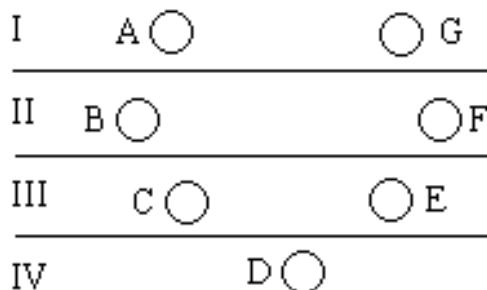


Figure 4.2: The Seven Globes

A round starts at Globe A of the chain, and each globe sees an evolution through what Blavatsky named the Seven Root Races, or seven different epochs of civilization for each globe.⁷⁴ Once the life wave has completed the seven Root Races for Globe A, it moves on to Globe B and evolves through the Root Races again – meaning that each Globe consists of a sevenfold cycle. According to theosophists, we are currently on Globe D of the Earth planetary chain (the 4th Chain), in the 5th Root Race. This complex (and convoluted!) process, means the evolution of the life-wave is akin to making circles within circles, each subsequent circle being increasingly spiritually heightened.

⁷⁴ The term ‘race’ does not refer to notions of ethnicity, but the manifestation of human existence on different spiritual levels.

De Schloezer comments that in 1906 Scriabin's 'conversation was full of theosophical allusions to Manvantara, Pralaya, Seven Planes, Seven Races' (1923, P. 67)⁷⁵ and it seems probable to me that Scriabin linked the theosophical notion of the 'life wave' to his own 'waves of life', from which a single wave becomes separated, in the *Prefatory Act*. The wave is presented on all levels of existence, providing a link between Scriabin's primordial Masculine and Feminine Principles, and the emergence of individual consciousness in the material world. During this process the wave unites with light, creating the visible, conscious world, the translation here is taken from Simon Morrison (2001):

The circle closed and there arose
The fruit of the marriage of wave and light
The starry face of the created world.

...

And the light beam caresses of the first-chosen couple
Coming to consciousness as a mirage of blinding wonders
Became recognized in the multi-colouredness, multifacetedness
As the adornments of the couple, the brocades of its veils

The circular nature of the waves' journey is further displayed in two contrasting stanzas, the first from towards the beginning of the text:

We [the waves of life] are all united
A current, directed
From eternity to an instant
On the path to humanity
Down from transparency
To stony gloom.

The second found towards the end:

We are all in love
A current, directed
From an instant to eternity on the path to infinity
From stony gloom to radiant transparency.

The first excerpt describes the descent into conscious, temporal existence; from the

⁷⁵ Manvantara and Pralaya are also theosophical terms, Manvantara being the name given to the life cycle and Pralaya meaning the period of dissolution between cycles.

spiritual to the material. De Schloezer comments on this descent to individual consciousness in relation to Scriabin's cosmology, relating it to desire: 'as soon as individual consciousness realizes that it is limited ... it ardently desires to transcend the boundaries of a conditional, relativistic state of being' (1923, p. 219). The evolution of the spirit through the different planes is thus linked to erotic desire, resulting in spiritual struggle and suffering.⁷⁶ The following involution of spirit, back to a state of spiritual oneness – as referred to above in the second extract – leads to ecstasy; 'the destruction of all barriers, boundaries' (*ibid.* p. 221).

Desire and suffering as part of spiritual evolution are symbolised by the human hero, the character emerging in the latter half of the *Prefatory Act*. The hero is barbaric and unrelenting, he suffers death, and hears the voice of the Eternal Feminine, who instructs him to return to life, and to show the people of the world that the path to her lies through suffering and death. The suffering that the hero endures has more than an echo of Scriabin's own inner spiritual struggle, as described in Chapter 2. In his encounter with death, the hero turns inwards, towards the spiritual, just as Scriabin did throughout much of his life, turning away from social and political events outside; believing the future to lie in the inner world of the spirit and the desire to transcend individuality.⁷⁷

4.2 Cyclical evolution and involution in the *Prefatory Act* and beyond

Before his encounter with Theosophy, Scriabin displayed a similarly cyclical approach to the evolution of consciousness. He initially described this in simple terms

⁷⁶ For a detailed discussion of desire in relation to Scriabin's approach to harmony, see Chapter 3

⁷⁷ The notion of accepting struggle and suffering as part of existence is also quite likely inspired by Nietzsche, and particularly his notion of the 'Uber-Mensch'. The notion of renewed life, or gain of knowledge through a period of suffering and struggle has almost autobiographical reverberations regarding Scriabin's own struggles with religion, his hand injury, and his inner search for spiritual answers.

as a 'rhythmic figure: unconscious state; conscious (sensation of life); unconscious state' (De Schloezer, 1923 p. 205). He later expanded this scheme further into the following, similarly circular theory:

0. Nothingness – Beatitude.
1. I desire (before chaos).
2. I begin to discriminate vaguely
3. I discern. I begin to distribute elements (time and space) and foresee the future of the universe.
4. I ascend to the summit and experience oneness.
0. Beatitude – Nothingness (ibid., p. 205).

A similar circular process is perhaps displayed in Figure 4.3, found in one of Scriabin's notebooks, shown here with translation of Scriabin's annotations:

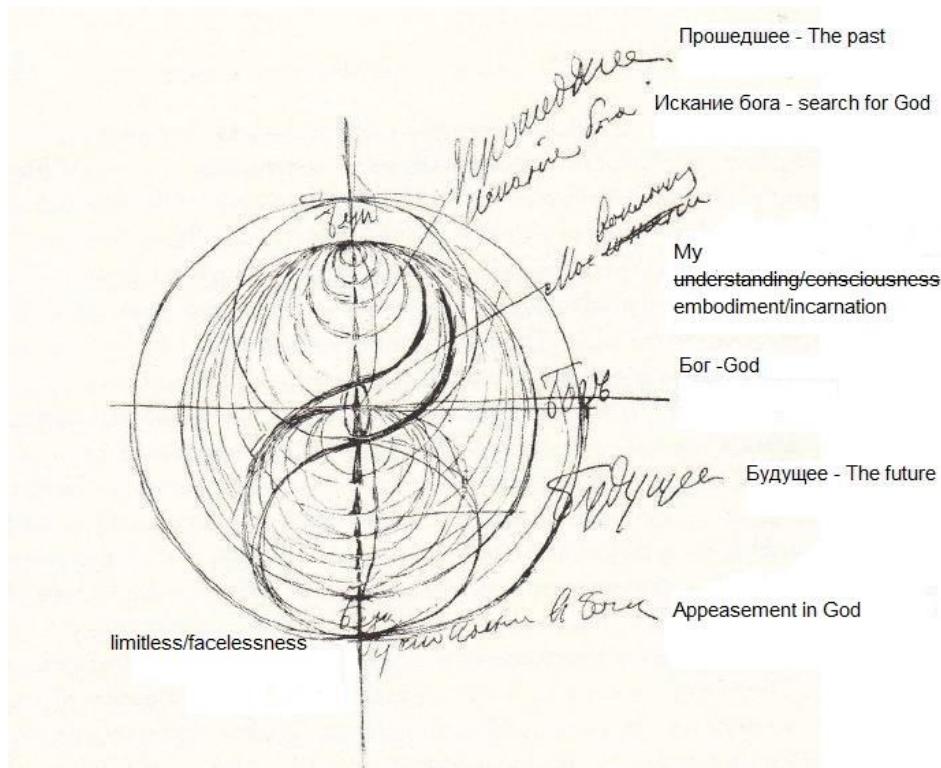


Figure 4.3

This diagram seems to show evolution from past to future, the outer circle representing God, with the embodiment of the spirit at the centre. Where the two curving, descending, lines are furthest apart is where Scriabin has annotated his 'embodiment',

i.e. the present, and perhaps represents the period of greatest differentiation between spirit and matter. In similar cyclical fashion, the process captured starts and ends with the outer circle: God, or the Divine.

The overarching form of the *Prefatory Act* libretto is similarly cyclical. It is a journey from a primordial state, down to the physical plane of conscious existence – as symbolised by the human hero. This is followed by a spiritual ascent – initiated through suffering, increasing desire and dance, to a transformed state of oneness, or ecstasy. Scriabin alludes to a repeated process of ‘circular’ transformation through his use of language, which suggests that events have happened before – perhaps alluding to an earlier planetary chain, globe or round.⁷⁸ An example of this may be found in the opening lines, ‘Once again’ suggesting this has previously occurred:

Once again the Primordial One wills you
To accept love’s grace
Once again the Infinite One wills
To recognise itself in the finite.

A few lines later we find another reference to rebirth, in this case through the word ‘anew’, as the chorus sings:

Greatness is being fulfilled
And, sweet anew,
Love is being born!

Scriabin also refers to circular, or spiral-like motion, such as in the section headed *Dance-song of the fallen*, in which the chorus is described as whirling ‘in two combined tornadoes’. There are also references to ‘the whirlwinds of primal perfection’, and towards the end of the text the following lines associate the circular motion with the moment of final spiritual dissolution:

We will all dissolve in the ethereal whirlwind

We will be born in the whirlwind!
We will awaken in heaven!
We will merge emotions in a united wave!

⁷⁸ Morrison also advocates for such an interpretation (2001, pp.184-241).

The concept of being ‘born’ at the moment of dissolution and transfiguration is perhaps another allusion to theosophical reincarnation. Furthermore, De Schloezer refers to the idea of a ‘whirlwind’ in relation to Scriabin’s notion that the process of involution – of return to a spiritual state of oneness – could be sped up with the consequence that ‘whole periods of history can occur instantaneously, like the flash of lightening, setting off a cosmic whirlwind in a wild dance’ (1923, p. 216).⁷⁹

A further examination of the temple in which Scriabin planned the *Mysterium* to be enacted reveals a similar connection with the shape of the circle or sphere, the following is a very rough pencil sketch made by Scriabin:

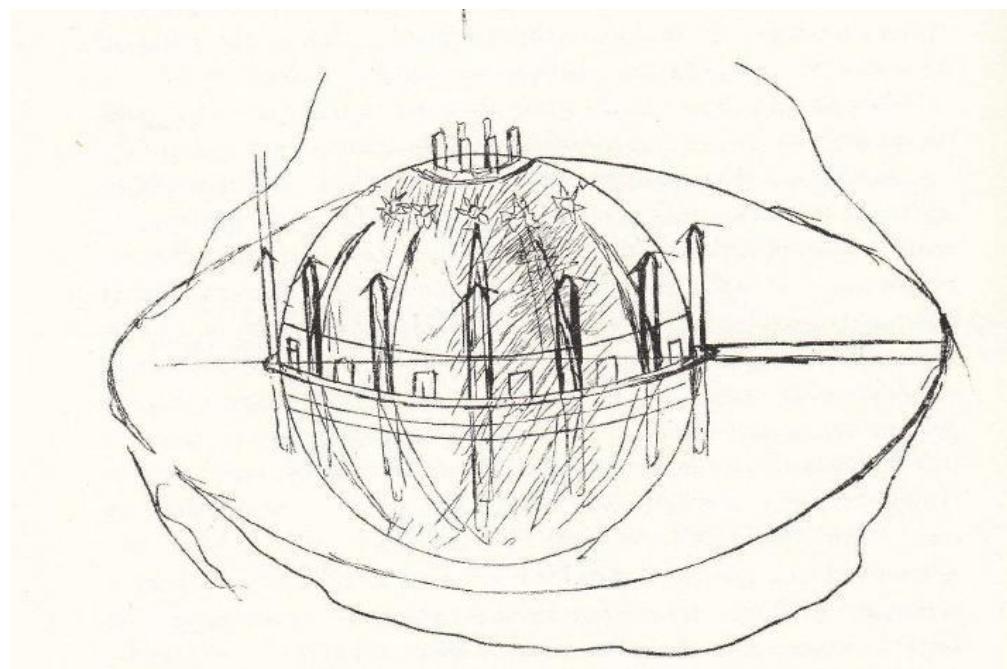


Figure 4.4: Image originally found in one of Scriabin’s notebooks, taken here from Bowers (1970, p.66).

De Schloezer further explains the design, writing that ‘[The Temple] was to be a gigantic circular edifice topped by a high cupola ... [It] consisted of a hemisphere

⁷⁹ Scriabin acknowledged that, in theosophical doctrine, we are the fifth race, half way through the earth planetary chain, but ultimately believed that his art held the potential to speed up the process of involution through races six and seven.

surrounded by water, so that its reflection would create the visual impression of a complete sphere' (1923, p. 264). A complete sphere being created out of the reflection of half a sphere perhaps provides a strong symbol for the polarity of unconscious and conscious existence, and a means of symbolically unifying these two states.

4.3 Circles and Sonata-form – Sonata No. 6

Sonata No. 6 displays many of the qualities associated with sonata-form. However – compared to what we may consider a more ‘conventional’, two-subject version – Scriabin extends the form to include what I have termed a third subject area in the exposition, and which is further extended into an extensive final coda in the recapitulation. I have determined the position of the three subject areas from the introduction of new, and contrasting melodic and harmonic material, as well as from Scriabin’s contrasting descriptive text. Table 4.1 summarises the scheme I perceive for the Sixth Sonata:

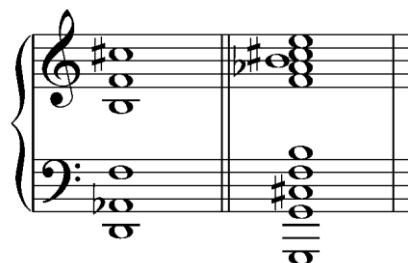
	1 st subject area ‘Mysterious’	Bar 1-38	Exposition
	2 nd subject area ‘Dream’	Bar 39-91	
	3 rd subject area ‘Horror’	Bar 92-123	
		Bar 124-205	Development
	1 st subject area ‘Mysterious’	Bar 206-243	
	2 nd subject area ‘Dream’	Bar 244-277	Recapitulation
	3 rd subject area ‘Horror’	Bar 278-304	
	3 rd subject area extended into a dance	Bar 304-386	Coda

Table 4.1

It is important to note that the above diagram is simply an attempt to visualize and simplify the different sections of the sonata; it does not take into account the possible temporal proportions of each section in terms of relative length. In this sonata, as in the other late sonatas, Scriabin ends with a dance – the description Scriabin uses in the score of the Sixth Sonata is ‘the horror surges and mingles in the delirious dance’, extending the musical material of the previous third subject section to create

the coda. If the coda is viewed as an extension of the third subject area then it could be argued that the Sixth Sonata is essentially made up of seven sections, an interpretation which brings to mind the septenary, cyclical nature of theosophical evolution.⁸⁰

It might be argued that the structural layout of the Sixth Sonata isn't truly circular as it is not strictly symmetrical – the recapitulation of the first and third subject areas would need to be swapped around. However, Sonata No. 6 does display a harmonic symmetry. The Sonata begins and ends in the same harmonic area – both based on a mystic chord with root G, as shown below in Example 4:



Example 4

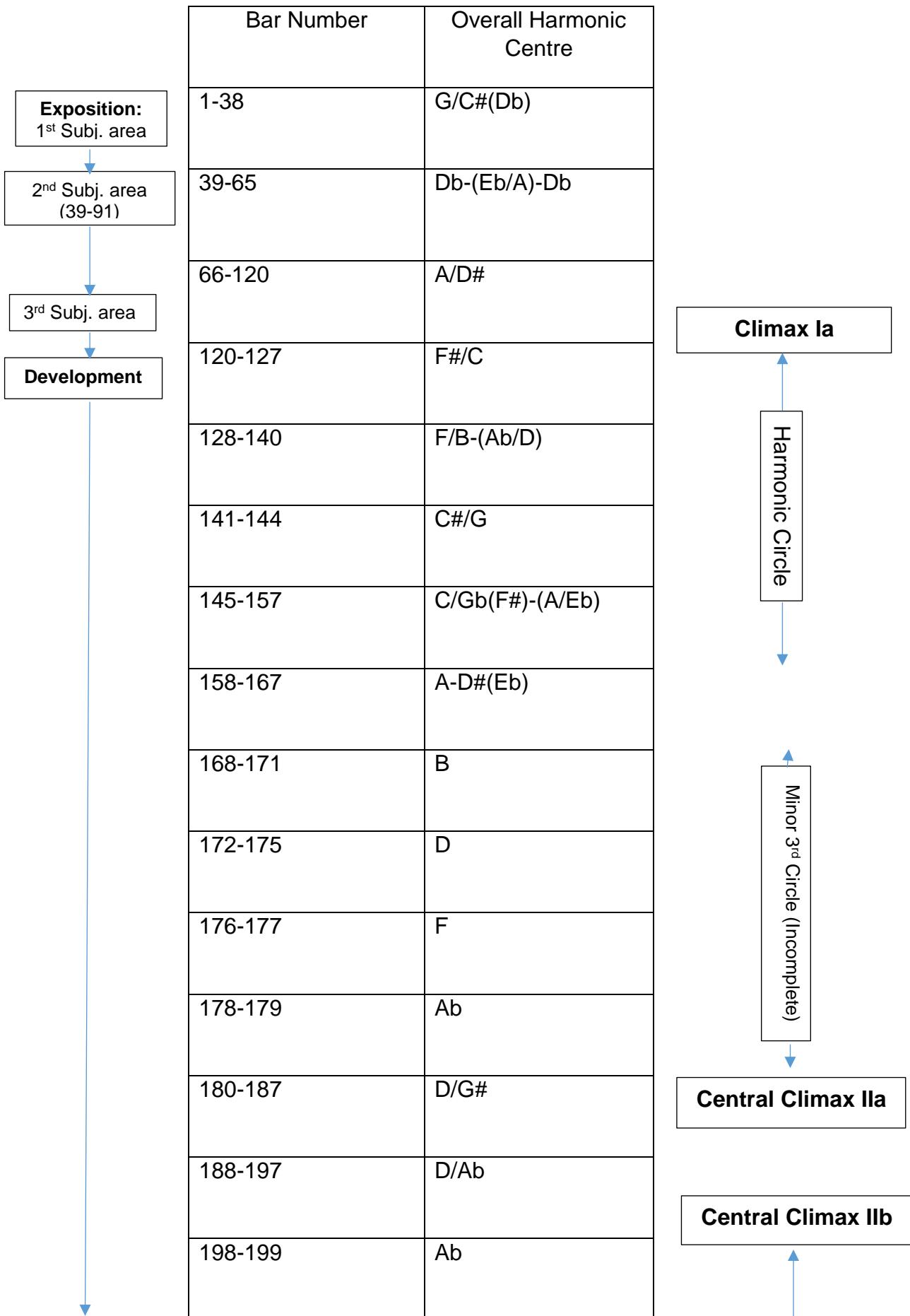
The opening mystic chord is enharmonically similar to a Db dominant 7th over a D bass, if we read the C# as Db, and the B as Cb. However, Scriabin's orthography suggests a different perceived root, which I understand as G. The D, F, B relate to a G dominant 7th harmony, whilst the Ab becomes a flattened 9th, and the C# a sharpened 11th. I would argue that it is possible to hear the chord in this way due to the spacing and distribution of the pitches, in particular the D bass and doubled F.

Crucially, the recapitulation occurs in a harmonic area transposed a major

⁸⁰ Gawboy (2010) argues that *Prometheus*, composed not long before the sixth sonata, is laid out in seven-stages and that this is directly related to Scriabin's understanding of theosophical cyclic evolution. She deduces this underlying scheme from the *luce* part – the part for colour organ – which is made up of two parts, one of which changes slowly and the other more frequently. From the slow-changing part, as well as from Scriabin's annotations in one of the original scores she suggests how the seven-stage evolutionary cycle is a basis for the larger compositional layout. For further exploration of circular structures within Scriabin's piano music, see also Kelkel (1999).

second lower, compared to the exposition.⁸¹ This means that the recapitulation can follow the same relative harmonic progressions as the exposition, ending up in the same harmonic area by the time the third subject area is reached for the second time. Table 4.2 shows the broad harmonic scheme of the Sixth Sonata and identifies what I have judged to be the significant changes of harmonic center; details such as where a harmonic center is established, deviated from and then immediately returned to, have been omitted for the sake of simplicity and clarity. Due to Scriabin's use of tritone polarity, I have generally given two centers related by a tritone, unless otherwise clear. In addition to the subject areas, I have also shown the position of the three main climatic points:

⁸¹ It is noteworthy that the Seventh and Eighth Sonatas also recapitulate in a different harmonic area to their expositions, and both similarly only return to the opening harmonic area towards the end of the recapitulation.



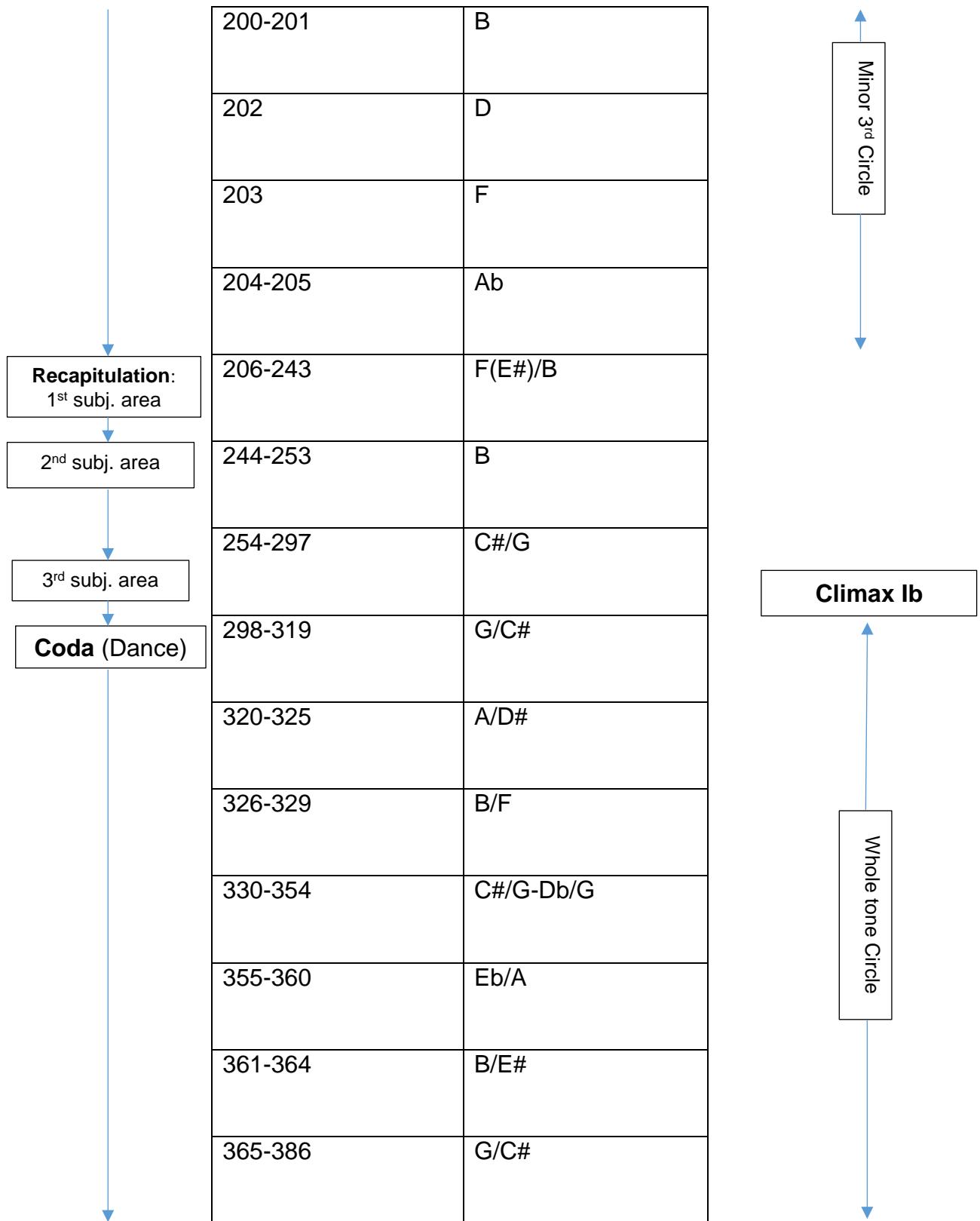


Table 4.2

The first and last climaxes – Ia and Ib above – contain the same musical material, whilst the central climax – IIa and IIb – is different, creating a further schematic symmetry, which adds to the sense of a large, ‘circular’ layout.

Harmonic circles - transformation and synthesis

A harmonic progression which is prevalent in Sonata No. 6 – as well as throughout the late works – is that which moves through harmonies related by a minor 3rd. The numerous examples of this type of progression can be partly explained by Scriabin’s ubiquitous use of the octatonic scale in this work, the octatonic collection consisting of two diminished 7th chords.⁸² However, a closer examination of the structural points at which these progressions are employed – in particular where they form a complete minor 3rd circle – suggests that these progressions occur at moments of structural significance and change. Table 4.2 above also shows that the overarching circular compositional structure contains a number of smaller harmonic circles, created in three ways:

- By moving through harmonies which lie a minor third apart, creating a ‘minor third circle’.
- By moving through harmonies each a tone higher than the previous, creating a ‘whole tone circle’,
- A more general ‘harmonic circle’, created by returning to a previous harmonic center after a number of changes of harmonic center.

One such example is found in the transition between the second and third subject areas, bars 92-101:

⁸² Wai-ling (1996, p. 2) suggests that the Sixth Sonata is 58.8% purely octatonic – calculated based on occurrences of purely octatonic writing of four consecutive bars or more. Other works also display such use of octatonism, in particular *Guirlandes*, Op. 73 no. 1 (73.8%) and Sonata No. 7, Op. 64 (45.2%).

Example 4.1

This circular progression links two very contrasting sections. The second subject area is characterized by a beautiful rising theme, sensuous chromaticism, glowing harmonies and a simplicity of texture; the third subject area is dominated by terrifying harmonies, bells, and allusions in the score to ‘evil’ forces. The above progression provides a transition between these two sections, moving through harmonies with roots A – C – Eb – F# as the character of the music is transformed from sensuous beauty to an ominous and terrifying darkness. The use of this circular harmonic progression at a point of musical transformation brings to mind the circle in theosophical doctrine as a symbol of ongoing change and synthesis. I discuss the thematic and rhythmic transition from second to third subject area, as well as how this may fit into a perception of plot in the 6th Sonata, in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Further examples of harmonic circles at moments of musical and structural significance can be found in the development section. The following two examples are minor 3rd circles found just before two significant climactic points. The first, found in bars 168-179, leads towards the work’s central climax (Example 4.2), whilst the second occurs just before the music collapses into the recapitulation, bars 198-204 (Example 4.3). Both examples aim to capture the way in which Scriabin further manipulates the

rate of harmonic progression, increasing the frequency of harmonic change as the circle continues:

Example 4.2

In Example 4.2 (above) the central line shows the voicing of the various harmonies, whilst the bottom shows the deduced harmonic roots and the top the primary melodic pitches present in each bar(s). It should be noted that due to the likely use of the sustaining pedal, many of the different pitches will be heard simultaneously. Scriabin creates ‘hyper-bars’ – several bars that taken together have the same fundamental harmonic basis – and within these ‘hyper-bars’ he modifies the harmony through the changing melodic pitches. The length of the ‘hyper-bars’ decrease and the music gains momentum as the harmonic roots change more frequently.

Example 4.3 captures the harmonic circle in bars 198-204, which displays a similar technique:



Example 4.3

In this instance Scriabin utilises intermediate chords related by a tritone to overlap melodic phrasing with the main harmonic changes. The basic roots as I hear them are shown on the bottom line, the notes in brackets show the intermediate, tritone-related roots. As can be seen, the rate of harmonic change is consistently accelerated and the melodic phrases become shorter and shorter, Scriabin switching from the ‘rising’ second subject theme to the more angular ‘winged’ theme – first heard in bar 3 – as the music becomes more ecstatic. In both the above examples, Scriabin creates an increase in musical momentum through his manipulation of the rate of harmonic change.⁸³

4.4 Re-evaluating performance in view of the notion of continued circular transformation

In the following section I will consider how the above exploration of circular forms in Theosophy and Scriabin’s music has caused me to reflect upon certain

⁸³ Sabbagh comments on Scriabin’s use of this particular progression in *Prometheus* suggesting that 70% of the changes of harmony are by a minor third or tritone, and of these, two thirds are by a minor third. His diagram of the harmonic changes show the majority of harmonic changes move within minor third circles and that many form complete circles. Interestingly he shows that at the center of the work Scriabin uses a major third circle, the only time in the entire piece (pp. 72-104).

aspects of my performance interpretation of the Sixth Sonata. The performance suggestions that I will make are in no way meant as definitive, neither do I believe that such a thing exists, rather I hope to shed some light on the relationship between my research, analysis and practice, through a discussion regarding how an idea stemming from analysis and research has had consequences in practice, and the reasons I judge the outcome to be a more effective, ‘natural’, performance interpretation. This is not to say that other effective interpretations are not possible, and that my own interpretation will cease to evolve over time; neither does it discount the possibility that someone could consider my analysis and research and produce an entirely different practice outcome. My focus here is on the *process* that has led me to my current interpretative position. The endless possible interpretations that exist in practice do not invalidate this process, but are an expression of the exciting and stimulating world of possibilities which practice, and perhaps analysis to some extent, can present.

One of the most significant outcomes of my re-evaluation of the Sixth Sonata in relation to the circle lies in the continuous, steady motion that the shape of the circle invokes; every part of its curve is identical, and circular motion never-ending. In this respect, it may be argued that the circle, and circular harmonic progressions, relate well to the idea of harmonic desire, created by Scriabin’s use of dominant 7th based harmonies, which may be interpreted as creating a constant need for resolution, a resolution which lies beyond the music, as discussed in Chapter 3. In the same way, a progression which moves through a minor third circle may end up on the same harmony on which it began; the progression may create a sense of forward movement, yet doesn’t reach a resolvable goal. As I have reflected on this concept, I have come to consider that the constant, never-ceasing, process of transformation found in Theosophy – as represented by the circle – could have repercussions relating, in

particular, to choices of tempo and dynamic, and how these are manipulated in practice. More specifically, I have reconsidered how to most effectively approach, reach and pass beyond climactic musical moments, in view of the notion of constant, un-ending, ‘circular’ desire and transformation.

Tempo is a crucial aspect in my ‘circle’ based reinterpretation, and is a vital factor in relation to the proportions and effectiveness of a temporal-based, ‘performative’ structure, as well as contributing to the perception of musical character and energy. The range of tempo changes within a work may profoundly influence the effect of the music as it unfolds in performance, with particular regard to the sense of the music possessing forward momentum or the opposite. Before carrying out much of my research into this work, my earlier interpretation was based around trying to ‘show’ the three main climactic points, employing unwritten accelerations of tempo towards these moments, followed by a slowing down of tempo at the climax, so as to create a greater sense of arrival, as can be heard in my 2009 recording. I have since come to consider the way in which the shape of a circle may be better represented by a continuous sense of unfolding movement, the result in practice being an attempt at maintaining a more constant tempo, so as not to create such a strong sense of arrival at climatic moments. Within the context of Scriabin’s harmony, and in particular in consideration of the notion I have suggested of constant harmonic desire, I have come to judge that such an approach in practice may better reflect the unceasing tension inherent in Scriabin’s harmonies and may therefore be a more ‘natural’ performance interpretation; no one harmony is ever ‘arrived’ at as further resolution is always desired, the music allowed to unfold naturally in a way which better reflects my understanding of its harmonic sound and expressiveness.

Consequently, I have become increasingly critical of my unwritten tempo

alterations in my 2009 recorded performance, manipulated in order to ‘show’ compositional structure. Whilst I understand my reasons for this choice, which are to a large extent rooted in my education as a classical pianist and in the traditional pedagogical environment this encourages, and still like the excitement that it creates, I have progressively questioned whether the performative outcome is best suited to the expression of the work as a whole, and whether this sort of exaggeration may in fact work against the more suggestive nature of the music. I discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 5, in which I explore the second subject area as suggesting allure and seduction, qualities that are representative of the Feminine Principle, and the way in which I have tried to capture these more suggestive and subtle characteristics in performance. I also draw a critical comparison with my earlier approach to this section, in which I increased tempo and dynamic, contrary to the score, as a means of trying to make the section sound like a unified, broad unfolding. I contrast this with my present interpretation in which I try to create the same sort of broad unification, but through different means – through sustaining dynamic and tempo, and through exploiting what I perceive as the music’s natural harmonic and melodic suggestiveness.

A further reason for my current decision not to change tempo unless written was found through a closer analysis of Scriabin’s circular harmonic progressions, from which I now contend that many changes in the music’s momentum are created by Scriabin speeding up or slowing down the frequency of harmonic change, as shown in Examples 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 above. For instance, the minor third circle shown in Example 4.1 is accompanied by a change in time signature from 3/8 to 2/8, which has the effect of speeding up the frequency of the changes of harmony, without needing to increase the tempo. The significance of this understanding from a performance

perspective is that no change of tempo is needed to give the effect of increased forward momentum. Similar instances have been discussed above with regard to Examples 4.2 and 4.3. In both, Scriabin creates an increase in musical momentum through his manipulation of the rate of harmonic change; a change in tempo at these moments will exaggerate this change in momentum far more.⁸⁴

Whilst I currently maintain the same basic tempo throughout these passages, it is possible that another performer may interpret my above analysis as requiring further tempo acceleration in practice, so as to further exaggerate the effect. This performance interpretation would be no less valid than my own, and I still recognize that my 2009 performance – though contrary to my current interpretation – is effective and based on careful consideration. My main criticism of such an approach is that I don't currently find it the most effective way of reflecting the constant, unrelenting tension of Scriabin's harmonies based on the mystic chord, a view which stems from the way I currently hear these harmonies, not as a 'new' system with a new sense of resolution, but rather within the context of nineteenth-century dominant function.

⁸⁴ Sabbagh comments on Scriabin's use of this particular progression in *Prometheus* suggesting that 70% of the changes of harmony are by a minor third or tritone, and of these, two thirds are by a minor third. His diagram of the harmonic changes show the majority of harmonic changes move within minor third circles and that many form complete circles. Interestingly he shows that at the center of the work Scriabin uses a major third circle, the only time in the entire piece (Sabbagh, pp. 72-104).

Chapter 5

A performance of the Sixth Sonata

Part A: The duality of Masculine/Feminine and Purity/Horror in the exposition of the Sixth Sonata

So far I have explored the large-scale compositional layout of the 6th Sonata from a harmonic perspective, as well as the various types of harmonies that Scriabin draws from his mystic chord, and the relation this understanding of harmony may have to a musical symbolism of theosophical evolution. In this respect I have suggested in the previous chapter that Scriabin's harmony, along with aspects of compositional structure, may be interpreted as reflecting the notion of a process of constant circular transformation and desire, and have explored some ways in which this has led me to reconsider certain aspects of this work in a performance context.

I now turn to a discussion of how I have come to interpret Scriabin's expressive markings on the score as referring to an abstract, extra-musical 'narrative', related to the *Prefatory Act* libretto. In this extra-musical narrative certain melodic and harmonic patterns are understood as representing certain characters, emotions and moods. I explore how the changing harmonic, dynamic, textural and temporal context of certain melodic themes, or 'characters', may be understood as alluding to certain aspects of the libretto, and I attempt to demonstrate through audio examples how such a reading may be relevant to performance. I also discuss how I have used practice to make certain interpretative judgments and choices.

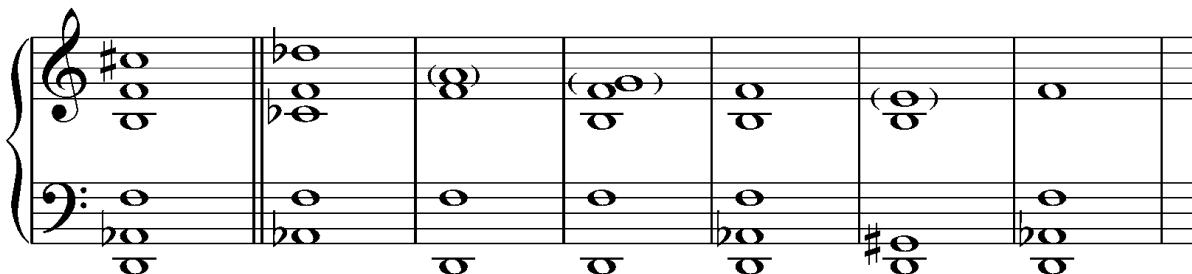
The exposition of the Sixth Sonata may be loosely divided up into three sections; I have referred to these throughout as the first, second and third subject areas, or the 'mysterious', 'dream' and 'horror' sections respectively. The 'mysterious' first subject area runs from the opening to bar 14, immediately repeated and slightly

extended in bars 15-38; the ‘dream’ second subject area runs from bar 39-91, with an extended repetition from bar 55 onwards; and finally the ‘horror’ third subject area runs from bar 92-123. These are very loosely and broadly defined sections, the names I have ascribed reflecting only something of the characteristic features of the music for the sake of reference.

5.1 The mystic opening and the emergence of the Masculine Principle

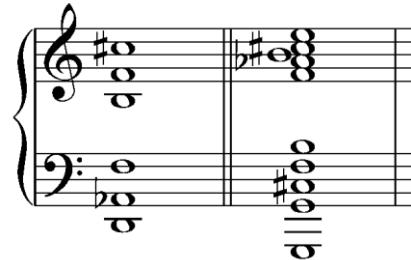
In keeping with the notion that the sonata-form in Scriabin’s Sonata No. 6 was conceived within the context of previously promoted gender associations, I propose that the principal themes of the exposition may be understood as displaying similar characteristics to the symbols of the Masculine, Feminine and Waves, as found in the *Prefatory Act* libretto. Whilst this is not verifiable directly from Scriabin, I will argue that such an interpretation has been helpful and influential to my understanding from a performance perspective, and that such a connection has led me to refine and clarify the characteristics that I associate with certain musical phenomena.

The three subject areas of the exposition are made harmonically distinct, and are characterized by different versions of the Sixth Sonata’s mystic chord. The opening ‘mysterious’ section begins with the following version, which is shown here along with some of the possible harmonies ‘within’ this chord:



Example 5.1

This harmony is only one version of the Sixth Sonata's mystic chord, a 'fuller' version being heard at the very end with the omission of the D, which may be explained if the D in the opening is understood as a quasi-dominant pedal, which only 'resolves' onto G at the end:



Example 5.2

Scriabin's orthography at the opening further supports a G basis: the upper five pitches enharmonically form a Db7 harmony – crucially notated with B and C#, rather than Cb and Db – this choice of notation suggesting a perceived root of G, rather than Db: the B read as the major third, the C# as a sharpened eleventh, and the Ab as a minor ninth.⁸⁵ Such a reading makes sense within the context of the opening three bars, the G added in bar 3. This interpretation is significant as the masculine material of the opening, and the feminine material from bar 39 onwards, are tritone related; the feminine theme first harmonised primarily with a chord relating to Db:



Example 5.3

⁸⁵ Smith (2010, 2013) suggests, as I have discussed in Chapter 3, that Scriabin's harmonies may be heard as relating to two roots. Whilst I have questioned if it is possible to actually *hear* two roots, I would also suggest that Scriabin's careful enharmonic decisions relating to notation, also at times suggest a singular perceived root.

As previously discussed, this tritone relationship may be perceived as a significant symbol of duality. Interestingly, the first melodic interval of the ‘rising’ second subject theme – as well as the accompanying Db7 harmony heard first in bar 39 – are also present within the opening gesture, the rising semitone found in the grace note upbeat, and the Db7 harmony formed out of the upper five pitches:

Modéré
mystérieux, concentré

Example 5.4

From a practical perspective, I have often found the opening to be uncomfortable as I am physically unable to reach the first full right-hand chord, without also clipping a C with my thumb.⁸⁶ It seems likely to me that – considering Scriabin was a pianist – such an arrangement of the opening chords is deliberate, leading to the chords being spread and the right-hand thumb being used to ‘bring out’ the Bb-B rising semitone. Significantly – as can be heard in audio example 1 (2015) – the ‘bringing out’ of the B on the downbeat affects the voicing of the opening downbeat chord, drawing attention away from a possible ‘D minor’ sound – due to the D bass and doubled F – and creating a more complex voicing. What can also be heard here is my solution to the practical difficulties: I spread the right-hand down beat chord – focusing weight on the right-hand thumb – as well as spreading the left-hand grace note chord, taking the D and G together, and then the F, helping to also draw out the shadowing G-Ab semitone

⁸⁶ It is likely that neither could Scriabin, as he was always reported as having small hands.

movement in the left hand. Whilst this is not the only solution to the difficulties of this opening, it reflects, by bringing out the semitone movement as a sort of opening impulse, my interpretation of the opening gesture as a sort of ‘awakening’ of something out of the preceding silence.

An important element in this opening figure is the repeated D octave in the left hand and I explore later evidence that may support the connection between this type of octave figure and a ‘call’ or ‘summons’. At the opening it may also be used to help set the underlying pulse of the opening section (audio example no. 1) by placing the repeated D bass octaves exactly in tempo, as well as retaking the opening chord silently, so as to release the D octave on the third beat, and releasing the whole chord on the downbeat rest of the following bar. The subtle setting of a strong underlying pulse helps the music to sound slowly, but constantly moving, rather than static, the pulse needed to feel the rhythmic syncopations which come later in bars 4 and 6. A visual sense of pulse may also be created by the retaking of the chord silently; the audience is likely to see the movement of the left hand chord retaken on the third beat, and everything fully released on the first beat of bar 2.

I would like to argue that this practice-led exploration of the opening leads to a different understanding of how this gesture *sounds*, as opposed to an interpretation based solely on the score. Given the voicing of the right hand thumb from Bb-B, the left hand from G-Ab, and the octave D bass, what is heard is a harmony that more closely resembles a diminished 7th. From the score alone, it may be possible to draw other interpretations of this harmony – some of which have been suggested above in Example 5.1 – however I believe this demonstrates the important role practice plays in this analytical process, and the harmonic ambiguity that a diminished 7th can suggest is in keeping with the notion of a ‘mysterious’ opening.

The most distinct thematic element of the opening section is an angular figure marked *étrange, ailé* – or ‘strange’, ‘winged’ – first heard in bar 3, the ‘winged’ description suggesting a possible connection to the Masculine Principle, which is frequently described in terms relating to ‘flight’ in the *Prefatory Act* libretto:



Example 5.5

From a performance perspective, the consequence of such a connection has been the reassessment of tempo and rhythmic character, as can be heard by comparing the choice of tempo in my two recordings of this passage – audio examples nos. 2 (2009) and 3 (2015). In my earlier interpretation, I had tried to create the ‘mysterious’ and ‘concentrated’ mood by choosing a slower tempo, exaggerating the static bass and close-moving chromatic lines. More recently, the connection I hear with the active Masculine Principle has led me to consider a faster tempo, safe in the knowledge that Scriabin has created a ‘mysterious’ and ‘concentrated’ sound in the first place. I would argue now that the quicker tempo choice makes greater sense of the rhythm of the opening – the syncopations in bars 4 and 6 have more intensity, and a greater sense of restlessness and direction. In addition, the semitone movement in the middle voice of the left hand in bars 5 and 7, which stems from the opening rising semitone, can be played with greater impulse. Such a choice of tempo may also aid a longer sense of phrasing, which is achieved through listening through each chord and matching the sound of the next chord to the decay of the previous one; the decay of the sound is

slower within a quicker pulse and so the connection more readily achieved.

In bars 9-11, the ‘winged’ nature of the masculine theme is enhanced by its use in a minor third progression as the bass finally moves from the pedal D, generating an increased sense of forward rhythmic movement:



Example 5.6

An aspect of my 2009 performance that I still maintain is the minimal use of pedal in this passage to enhance the energised nature of the ‘winged’ figure, as well as its strange and angular accompaniment, whilst also serving to reinforce the melodic ‘awkwardness’ of its shape.

By playing the reduction of the above bars slowly at the piano, I hear a sense of tension and release, which has caused me to reconsider the way I inflect the ‘winged’ figure in this context. Below is a reduction of the harmonies in question, along with the outline of the melodic line, which can also be heard in audio example 4 (2016):

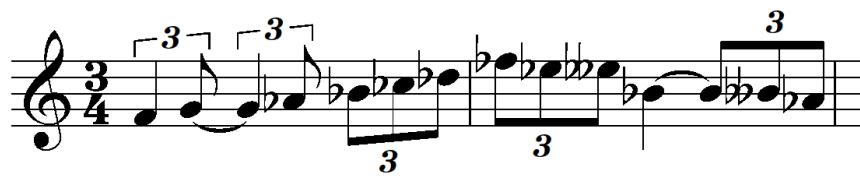
Example 5.7

The rising semitones between Bb-B, C#-D and E-F, may be heard as creating tension and release, and understood in a broader context as relating to the rising semitone between leading note and tonic. Such an interpretation has caused me to dynamically inflect this figure towards the last note – the C# and the E – which also helps these notes to sound through their full length, creating a longer sense of phrasing, which may be desirable, given the disjointed nature of the music here. While I acknowledge that my preference for such a longer sense of phrasing is most likely rooted in my training as a classical pianist, in which the impulse to phrase becomes second nature, it is nevertheless an aesthetic outcome that I am convinced by in this context.

5.2 The ‘wave chain’

I have termed the three melodic elements that follow, detailed in the examples below, the ‘wave chain’ as I have come to interpret these thematic components as possibly representing the different aspects of the Waves, as found in the *Prefatory Act*. In the following section I explore my reasons for this interpretation, with regard to the way the ‘wave chain’ themes relate to harmonic and melodic features of the masculine and feminine elements of the exposition, as well as creating a transition between first and second subject areas. I suggest how such an interpretation has caused me to consider my approach to the ‘wave chain’ themes in practice, with particular regard to characterization.

I have labelled these three melodic elements a ‘chain’ as they are frequently heard in the same sequence, consisting of a rising and falling theme marked *avec une chaleur contenue*, ‘with restrained warmth’:



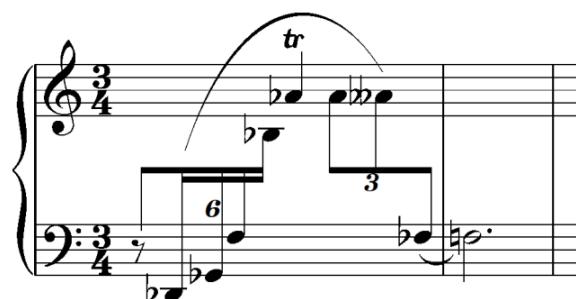
Example 5.8

A falling-rising theme marked *souffle mysterieux*, ‘mysterious breath’ – the word ‘souffle’ can also translate as ‘murmur’, ‘inspiration’ and even ‘spirit’:



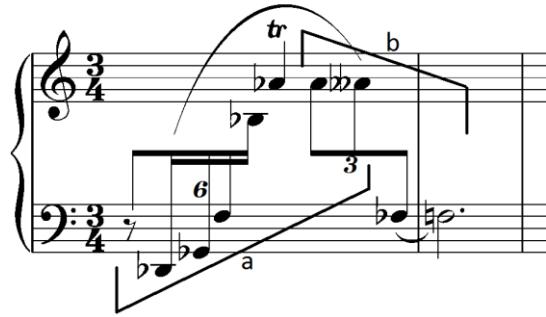
Example 5.9

And a sensuous figure marked *onde caressante*, ‘caressing wave’, which is first presented in the following form:



Example 5.10

The ‘caressing wave’ figure is made up of two main elements, shown here as ‘a’ and ‘b’:



Example 5.11

Certain characteristics of this ‘chain’ may be interpreted as relating to similar qualities associated with the Waves. Firstly, the Waves oscillate between a range of spiritual and energy levels: described as ‘languid’, existing in ‘storm clouds of desire’, and as ‘equally serving dark and light forces’. In comparison, the ‘restrained warmth’ element is also presented in many different harmonic and expressive contexts: Scriabin uses it in the development section, bars 180-181 and 184-185, marked ‘joyous’ – far from ‘restrained’ – as well as when describing the more ominous sounding ‘gathering of mysterious forces’, shortly after in bars 190-197. In addition, the rising part is heard rhythmically altered, and accompanied by one of Scriabin’s ‘ominous’ harmonies – as discussed in Chapter 3 – in the third subject area, as the music moves towards the repeated ‘horror’ chord:

Example 5.12

Secondly, I believe the ‘wave-chain’ bears melodic and harmonic similarities to both the first and second subject areas. The harmonic relationship between the first statement of the ‘winged’, masculine element, and the feminine second subject may be understood as that of a G-Db tritone; an examination of the harmonies which accompany the ‘restrained warmth’ element of the ‘wave chain’ would suggest an alternation between harmonies also related to G and Db:



Example 5.13

There may also be an intentional melodic connection between the thematic and accompanying components of the ‘wave-chain’ and both the masculine and feminine thematic elements; when the ‘restrained warmth’ theme is first heard, it is accompanied by a figure which is very similar to the accompaniment of the ‘winged’ theme:



Example 5.14

The melodic shape of the ‘restrained warmth’ theme is also similar to the second

subject ‘rising dream’ theme and its ‘falling’ counterpart, and the ‘falling’ theme is melodically similar to the chromatically descending ‘breath’ theme:

Example 5.15

The ‘breath’ element is also harmonised in bars 13 and 29 with a similar Db7 related harmony as the ‘rising dream’ second subject, and its accompaniment in the exposition contains the same rising semitone as found at the opening, and which forms the start of the ‘rising dream’ theme:

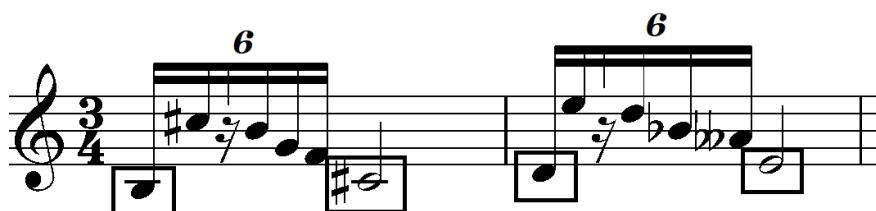
Example 5.16

The ‘a’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ theme is also harmonised with what may be heard as a similar dominant 9th harmony, based on Gb in bar 14. The ‘b’ element, through its chromatic nature, brings the harmony back to the sound world of the very opening in the last beat of bar 14-15:



Example 5.17

A further connection may be found between the ‘wave-chain’ and the ‘winged’ theme if we examine the outline created by the masculine theme during its initial minor third progression in bars 9-10, the outline forming the same relative pitches as form the first four notes of the ‘restrained warmth’ theme:



Example 5.18

I have used the notion of a link between the ‘wave chain’ themes and the masculine and feminine elements, as a basis for trying out new approaches to characterisation in practice, particularly in relation to the varied energy levels that the Waves assume in the *Prefatory Act* – trying to capture a feeling of ‘held back’ impulsiveness in the ‘restrained warmth’ theme, and a softer, gentler, more dreamy and sensuous character in the ‘breath’, and ‘a’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ themes.

Audio example no. 5 (2015) demonstrates how I have attempted this interpretation in practice. I keep the accompaniment figure of the ‘restrained warmth’ theme without pedal, so as to retain something of the character of the accompaniment

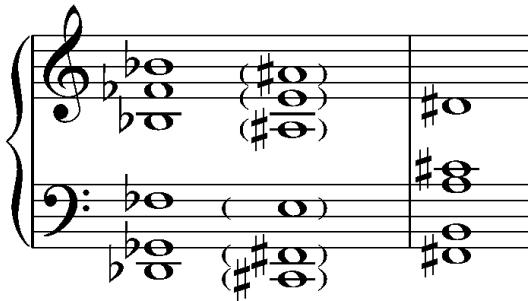
heard in the preceding bars 9-10, allowing myself some rubato in the rising and falling of this theme through holding back in the rhythmically longer first two notes, and then allowing the tempo to speed up a little towards the highest note of the phrase in bar 12; the slight holding back on the first two notes (F to G), perhaps helping to draw a connection with the outline created by the ‘winged’ figure in bars 9-10. I try to soften the edge of the start of the following ‘breath’ theme by displacing my hands slightly, left before right, and have found that this physically makes my hands *feel* softer, and in doing so creates a more ‘murmured’, blurred sound.

5.3 The ‘wave-chain’ transition

The way in which the three ‘wave-chain’ themes are used to create the transition between the masculine first subject area, and the emergence of the feminine second subject area at bar 39, provides a further argument for the linking of these themes to the Waves of the *Prefatory Act*. Before the transition begins, the opening bars 1-14 are repeated in bars 15-30, with two bars added into the minor third circle – bars 24 and 26. These bars not only take the circle one stage further in the minor third progression, but they also introduce a syncopated, repeated chord figure, which perhaps alludes ahead to the repeated chords which will emerge in the third subject area. Given the choice of a faster, more restless character of tempo for the opening, I have found that these chords can be used in performance to create greater urgency and impatience, characterising the Masculine Principle’s impulsiveness and growing desire.

An interesting comparison may be drawn at this point between the way Scriabin moves beyond the repetition in bars 30-31, and returns to the repeat of the opening at bars 14-15. In bars 30-31 we hear what may be perceived as a sort of V-I progression,

reduced below enharmonically:



Example 5.19

If bar 30 is enharmonically heard as a type of F#7 dominant 7th chord, then this ‘resolves’ onto a chord of B7+9th in bar 31, though neither chord is in root position. Such an understanding signals that the first occurrence of the F#/Gb7 chord in bar 14 may be heard as resulting in an ‘interrupted cadence’ in bar 15, the significance of which is that it may be possible to perceive bars 11-14 as the beginning of the transition, which is interrupted and then delayed, beginning again in bar 27. This notion has changed my perception of the way the opening ‘mysterious’ section is put together. Rather than hearing bars 1-14 repeated in bars 15-30 and then followed by a transition in bars 31-38, I now hear a far more integrated transition, which begins far earlier in bar 11 and is interrupted in bar 15, before beginning again in bar 27.

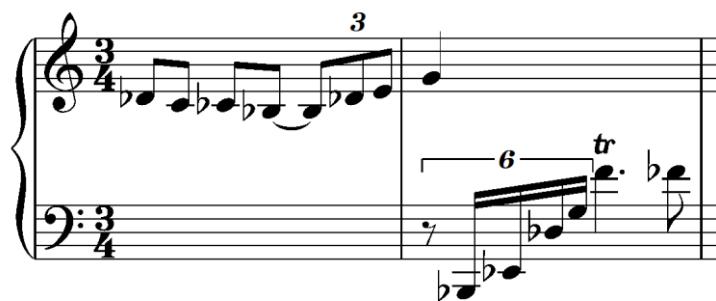
From a performance perspective, the consequences of this interpretation are demonstrated in audio example 5 (2015). I allow the *piano* at bars 13-14 – in which the ‘breath’ and ‘caressing wave’ elements are heard – to linger slightly, so as to exaggerate the idea of an interrupted cadence at bar 14-15, contrasting with the *mezzo forte* in bar 15. The upbeat quaver into bar 15 – not present in bar 30-31 and which is part of the ‘b’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ theme – is also dynamically inflected, as the Bb-B is the same as at the very opening.

When the ‘wave chain’ begins again in bar 27, there is now a textural difference and the left hand arpeggios are more flowing and less angular than the accompaniment in bars 11-12, creating a richer, fuller texture; the arpeggios more sensuous, and generating a slightly increased sense of movement. The transition is extended and continued in bar 31 with a restatement of the full ‘wave chain’, but transposed down a diminished 3rd, related to B rather than Db:



Example 5.20

In bars 35-36, Scriabin shortens this ‘chain’ to just the last two elements – the ‘breath’ and the ‘caressing wave’ – now transposed down a further semitone, relating to Bb:



Example 5.21

Finally in bars 37-38 Scriabin shortens the thematic ‘chain’ even further, now just using the ‘caressing wave’ figure. The shortening of the melodic phrases may create the impression of the music being drawn forward, this effect enhanced by Scriabin’s

inclusion of the marking *crescendo pochissimo* for the last two of these bars:



Example 5.22

In bars 37-38, the 'b' element of the 'caressing wave' theme is rhythmically elongated and leads us into the second subject area. A closer look at what makes up the 'b' element shows that it is formed out of a falling and rising semitone, possibly another example of reflection, as explored in Chapter 3:



Example 5.23

The way in which the ‘b’ element is used to lead into the feminine second subject area in bars 37-39 is similar to the way it leads back to the repeat of the opening masculine first subject area in bars 14-15, which is in keeping with the notion of the ‘wave-chain’ as connecting material between the masculine and feminine elements.⁸⁷ In addition to the use of the ‘b’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ theme, Scriabin also alters the melodic content of the ‘a’ element in bars 37-38, the effect of this – due to the likely use of the sustaining pedal – is an increasing complexity of harmony, causing the ‘pure’ dominant 7th harmony – which emerges in bar 39 – to sound simpler, and more noticeably contrasting, this is summarized below in a reduction of the harmony of bars 37-39:

Example 5.24

Due to the necessity of linear presentation that a written text demands, the preceding

⁸⁷ Garcia argues that trills are associated with divine illumination and eroticism, suggesting that ‘in the Sixth and the Ninth Sonatas ... trill passages continue to be associated with sexuality.’ (2000, p. 284). This supports the notion that the ‘wave-chain’ themes may be linked with the ‘Waves’ of the *Prefatory Act* – especially in view of the erotic union of the wave and light beam, and the more sensuous words with which Scriabin describes the waves – such as ‘kissing’ and ‘trembling’.

section may give the impression that there was also a linear temporal relationship between analysis and practice during this phase of my research, perhaps suggesting the ‘page to stage’ process that I criticized earlier; in reality, the analytical and practical components of my research are far more integrated and non-linear, analysis being guided at every stage by practice at the instrument, paying close attention to the way the music *sounds* – what I have referred to as ‘analytical listening’ in Chapter 1. In the case of the above exploration of the ‘wave chain’ transition, my analysis has helped me to understand fully something that I was only partly intuitively aware of, and my analysis of this passage – as well as the connection made with extra-musical ideas – has led to an enhancement of something I was already doing to some extent in practice.

In audio example no. 6 (2015) can be heard an example of how I currently try to approach this passage in performance. My full understanding of Scriabin’s shortening of the ‘chain’ – from four bars, to two bars, to one bar – has led me to slightly exaggerate the divisions between phrases, emphasising the decreasing phrase lengths. I try to play the two statements of the ‘restrained warmth’ theme – bars 27-28 and 31-32 – with less sense of holding back, compared with in bars 11-12, so as to allow the music to flow more in these bars, creating a greater feeling of forward momentum. I also slightly exaggerate the crescendo in bars 37-38, so as to create a real contrast in bar 39 when we are momentarily left with just a Cb sounding, before the upper line enters.

5.4 The ‘mystic call’ or ‘summons’

Another element which comes to the fore towards the end of the ‘wave chain’ transition is the idea of a ‘call’, or ‘summons’ motif, represented by a single,

occasionally repeated, octave. This is heard as a Db octave throughout bars 36-38 – traceable back as far as bar 30, and enharmonically bar 34 – and possibly anticipates the first note of the second subject ‘rising’ theme in bar 39. Later on in the Sonata – as well as in other works from this period – this sort of octave is described by Scriabin as a ‘mysterious call’ and its significance may extend beyond the Sixth Sonata and into the philosophy of the *Prefatory Act*, relating it to the ‘call’ of the Feminine Principle, who sings:

To you [masculine principle], dawning one, u u, to you impetuous one
My responding moan, u u, my beckoning cry.

The Masculine Principle responding with the following lines:

Who are you, arising in the sacred silence,
Summoning me with white light beams?

In fact, the ‘call’ or ‘summons’ can be traced all the way back to the repeated D bass octaves in bar 1, as can some of the melodic and harmonic elements of the feminine second subject area, as discussed earlier:

Modéré
mystérieux, concentré

Example 5.25

I have already described my interpretation of this gesture as some sort of ‘awakening’, which is in keeping with the reading that the section that follows may in some way relate to the Masculine Principle’s desiring response to the Feminine Principle’s

summons.

The octave ‘call’ in bars 30-38 anticipates the materialization of the ‘rising’ second subject theme, and the type of sound required from the octave ‘call’ must be carefully considered. In my view it is important that it be distinct from the rest of the texture in bars 30-38, so as to be heard as a significant thematic idea – this can be heard in audio example no. 7 (2015). Much of the music up until the introduction of the octave ‘call’ has been melodically linear whereas the octave ‘call’ is a more ‘vertical’ sound; it is not connected to any other notes melodically, but is rather recognizable simply as a bell-like sound. To achieve this pianistically, I suggest that both pitches of the octave should be voiced equally, and that it may be effective to play the octaves with a physical gesture which is more vertical in nature – I personally choose to play each octave ‘out of the key’; playing from the surface of the key but followed by a rising vertical gesture, as if striking a bell.

From a performance perspective, there are a number of different ways in which the second subject area can emerge at bar 39: it can emerge suddenly, the *piano* understood as a sudden drop in dynamic, conversely it could be prepared through a slight slowing down and *diminuendo*. I currently believe it is preferable to make the most of the sudden clarity of harmony and simplicity of texture heard at bar 39, so that the listener has a chance of registering that this is a new musical section, characterized by a new melodic, harmonic and textural sound. In keeping with the discussion of the consequences of a circular structure, the emergence of the second subject area is not an arrival, but the beginning of something new; it is a sudden change, but one which has been previously prepared and anticipated in the repeated Db octaves, and in the increasing complexity of the harmonies in bars 37-38, which is accompanied by a crescendo. To this end, I try to maintain the same tempo – the contrast, which will

hopefully lead to my listeners picking up the emergence of a new thematic idea, is created through the sudden change of texture, harmony and dynamic.

The two elements of the ‘caressing wave’ theme are also found *within* the second subject area, and the extra-musical connection between the ‘wave chain’ themes and the Waves from the *Prefatory Act* may be further supported by the following lines sung by the Waves:

We will dwell in dreams with audacity,
Equally serving dark and light [forces].

We are the radiant offspring of a divine dream,
We will be incarnated in pure souls as contemplation
Through us you will captivate the spirits of darkness and negation
And you will piece together fractured dreams anew.

The last line bears a resemblance to Scriabin’s marking *le rêve prend forme* – ‘the dream takes shape/form’ – and I would argue that it is perhaps in this light that the ‘caressing wave’ theme is found throughout the ‘dream’ section, now divided into its two separate elements and possibly reflecting the line ‘[w]e will dwell in dreams with audacity’:



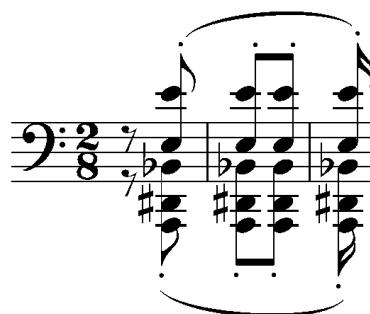
Example 5.26

I discuss in section 5.6 my suggestions for the performance of the ‘caressing wave’ themes within the second subject area.

5.5 The second and third subject areas – the ‘guise’ of beauty: seduction and the revelation of horror

In Chapter 2 I discussed Ivanov’s connection of the Feminine Principle with the notion of fate and death, and how this may have been captured by Scriabin in the *Prefatory Act*. I now explore how this concept has caused me to reconsider my interpretation of the vast change of character between the music of the second and third subject areas, examining the notion that they may relate to the symbolism of the feminine as a dual-faceted character, which wears the seductive mask of beauty and purity, only to be revealed as concealing the horror of death. I will explore how such a notion may be supported musically, and the consequences of such an understanding for practice.

In Chapter 3, I explored how Scriabin’s use of certain versions of the mystic chord might be interpreted as a musical symbolism of certain characters. The harmonies that are found in the second and third subject areas may be interpreted in a similar fashion: less complex dominant 7th harmonies are more prevalent in the second subject area, whereas the repeated chords which come to characterize the sound of the third subject area are far more ominous sounding, and are similar to such chords as the following, previously explored in Chapter 3:



Example 5.27, Sixth Sonata, bars 114-116:



Example 5.28, Seventh Sonata, bars 103-104, *avec trouble*:



Example 5.29, Poème-Nocturne, bar 99:

The horror which surges forward in the third subject area may be understood as inherent in certain characteristics of the second subject area, the ‘purity’ of the second subject acting as a ‘mask’ for the horror that follows and in keeping with how Scriabin refers to the notion of beauty in the *Prefatory Act* libretto. After the union of Wave and Light beam, Scriabin describes how the Eternal Feminine – the Feminine Principle presented as a symbol of death – is revealed to the Hero-wave in the ‘guise of beauty’, alluding to another aspect of the Feminine Principle’s character:

She [the hero-wave] is fully illuminated by heavenly light

And in her pangs the depth of the delight of the eternal feminine
Is now revealed to her for the first time

...

And before her inquisitive eyes appeared

...

The magnificent enactment of Holy rites
And the choral offering of great sacrifices
And the exquisite features of the white face
Which revealed itself in the guise of beauty.

The idea of ‘Holy Rites’ and ‘great sacrifices’ suggests something potentially more primal and terrifying and Scriabin later refers to ‘sister death’ in the following lines:

You, the repulsive face of horrid death
These black holes [vacant eyes] to eternity
Our carelessness disdains
After brief contact with it [eternity]
The passions draw us toward embodiment

The above is taken from the *Dance-Song of the fallen*, in which death is portrayed as ‘horrid’ and undesired, although ultimately the hero comes to gradually realise that death is actually what is *most* desired.⁸⁸ In the passage leading up to the *Dance-Song of the fallen* we find the following lines, which may be read as relating to the beauty, seductiveness, and ultimately the deceitfulness of the beauty of death, as symbolised by the Feminine Principle:

Surfaces of viscous mires
Twinkle like diamonds
Nets of opaline cobwebs
Sparkle

This is similar to what Ivanov refers to as ‘the deceptive charm of her [the feminine principle’s] eyes’ in his essay *Ancient Terror*, the above lines are followed by two contrasting stanzas, the first sweet, fragrant and beautiful, the second more ominous, which seem to allude to the same idea:

Luxuriant flowers
Open up everywhere

⁸⁸ In this respect death itself can be understood as a ‘mask’, behind and through which lies spiritual eternity.

The fragrances
Of sweet dream are everywhere

Everything around is saturated
With the scent of herbs
Fraught with languor
The horrors of the toxins.

The understanding of the Feminine Principle as having a dual-faceted character is further supported by examination of the late piano works dating from 1911-1912. In some of the late *Poèmes* we find explicit references to the notion that beauty is in some way falsely seductive, displayed in descriptions such as *avec une fausse douceur* – ‘with false sweetness’ – found in the *Poème Op. 63 No.2*, and *[a]vec une douceur caché* – ‘with hidden sweetness’ – found in the *Poème Op. 63 No. 1*, which is itself entitled *Masque*. In the *Poème Op. 63 No.2*, Scriabin presents the following theme, with the description ‘with false sweetness’ – the word *douceur* can also translate as ‘softness’ or ‘gentleness’:



Example 5.30

Scriabin may have symbolised the notion of ‘false sweetness’ here through his very specific notation, and in the relation of melody to harmony. A hint of the ‘falseness’ may be contained in the way the grace note very deliberately causes the melody note to sound before the accompanying falling figure. The result of this in performance can be to draw attention to the semitone clash, very quickly covered by the following notes,

but enough to hint at something perhaps a little nastier under the surface.

Interestingly, the basic shape of the melody is also similar to that of the ‘rising dream’ theme, the *Two Poemes Op. 63* composed shortly after the Sixth Sonata:



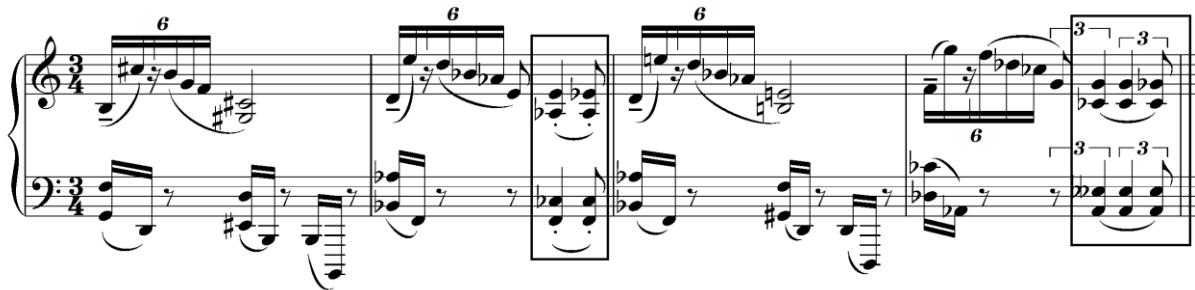
Example 5.31

The second subject area contains similar such hints of what lays behind the seductive ‘mask’ of purity and beauty; an embryo of the repeated ‘horror’ chords may be found accompanying the very first statement of the rising ‘dream’ theme, in bar 41-42:



Example 5.32

In fact, the repeated chords may be traced back to the opening ‘mysterious’ section, appearing in a rhythmically diminished form in bars 24 and 26:



Example 5.33

The repeated chords are heard again in the ‘dream’ section in bars 49-50, 58-59 and 69-70 – though in bars 49-50 and 69-70, whilst rhythmically similar, they are harmonically altered into more ‘pure’ and *suggestive* sounding dominant 7^{ths}; the ominous character of the chords is retained rhythmically, but the effect is lessened harmonically.

In practice, it may be effective to ensure that the sound of the repeated chords is different from the other musical material around them, and this may be realised through a combination of voicing and inflection. The contrast in sound can be achieved if the grace notes leading to the first chord in bar 41 are played quickly and resulting in a slightly stronger first chord, the second and third chords matching the decay of the sound; this contrast is similar to the idea of a more ‘vertical’ sound, as described earlier in relation to the ‘call’ octaves. If the chords are voiced to the top note then this has the effect of creating more definition to the sound of each chord, which will also help to create a contrasting sound to the surrounding material – it will also draw the ear’s attention to the way in which the top line leads the music to bar 43, back to the ‘falling’ dream theme, as the momentary distraction of the repeated chords is dissipated.

5.6 How does seduction *sound*?

I have argued that the second subject area may be heard as representing the

character of Scriabin's Feminine Principle, whose mask of seductive beauty hides an underlying darkness and horror, but what exactly can I do in practice to make this section *sound* seductive, and in what way can this be judged as a successful interpretation and realization of the music here? Important in my interpretation here are several further characteristics that I perceive to be associated with the notion of seduction in this context and which are partly drawn from the *Prefatory Act*: intimacy, allure, insistence and danger.

Audio example no. 8 (2015) presents one version of this section in which I perform the section from bar 39-80 with the above characteristics in mind. I have tried to create intimacy by making the most of the softer dynamic levels – for instance, I have played the repetition of the falling phrase in bars 62-64 (marked *pianississimo*) as soft as I can, so as to draw the ear in further. I would suggest that the energy that dissipates through the playing of the grace note figurations in bars 61 and 63 lends itself to being played with 'allure' – almost like a caress – and this may be created by exploiting the particular shape of the grace note figuration, which starts with a large rising interval, followed by three smaller falling intervals. As this figure is in the left hand, the second and highest note is played by the thumb, which creates a very particular, 'circular' physical movement, naturally stressing the second note, dissipating the dynamic energy through the remaining notes.

'Insistence' is already partly created by Scriabin's plentiful repetition of the rising theme, as well as the 'b' element of the 'caressing wave' theme; I have tried to further enhance this by maintaining an intensity throughout, sustaining the tempo and soft dynamic. Apart from the *pianississimo* falling phrase, I have also tried to maintain an intensity of *cantabile* throughout, which is manifested physically by 'clinging on' to every note, listening through and maintaining the connection from one note to another,

with a slight overlapping of the pitches.

In addition to trying to establish a sense of danger in the repeated chords of bars 41-42 and 57-58, I aim for a similar effect in bars 53-54, in which the rising part of the ‘caressing wave’ theme is used in a figuration which is rhythmically faster than the other material in the section. I play each statement here somewhat abruptly with a slight, but sudden urgency, which then immediately subsides through the ‘b’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ theme into bar 55 – the image that comes to mind is that of momentarily coming back to consciousness, before once again being drawn into an intoxicating dream.

Whilst the above description, and the accompanying audio example, are by no means meant as ‘definitive’, what I have attempted is to outline my thought process, describing how one might interpret these ideas in practice. I have used practice here as an experimental process in which I have found that not all ‘performances’ tried were judged by me to have successfully captured what I desired. The notion that Scriabin’s musical material *has* the above qualities is understood within the context of other, similar, musical examples in which similar characteristics may be perceived; and considering the notion of feminine seduction in a wider context of the music of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, may help to shed light on the reasons why I judge the music of the second subject area to be inherently ‘seductive’.

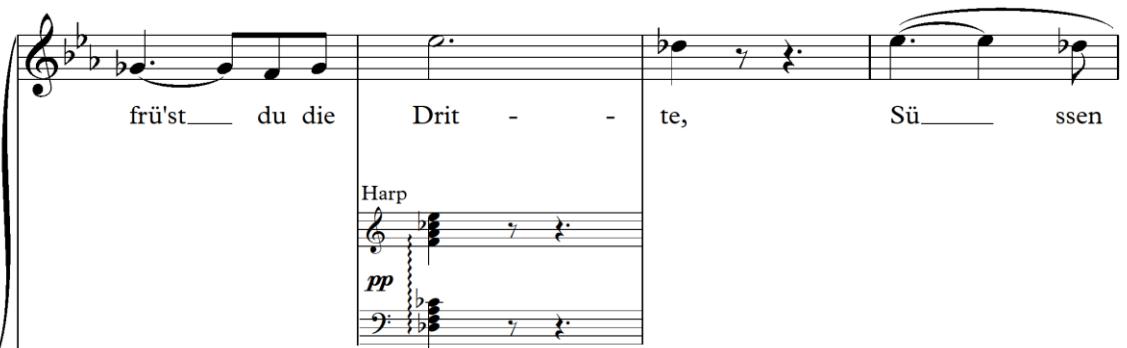
Through comparisons with Scriabin’s other late piano music, I have argued that the harmony of a ‘simple’ dominant 7th musically represents the feminine element of Scriabin’s philosophy. Texturally and harmonically, a similarity may be also drawn here with Ravel’s *Ondine*, as well as some of the music which accompanies Wagner’s Rhine maidens in *Das Rheingold*. In the opening exchange between the Rhine maidens and Alberich, the three maidens mock him by pretending to seduce him.

Flosshilde is the third Rhine maiden to play this game and the music at this point changes suddenly texturally and harmonically, the orchestral texture becoming far simpler, the woodwind sustaining a chord, whilst a solo violin doubles the singer's line:

Flosshilde: 

Solo violin 

Strings/Woodwind 

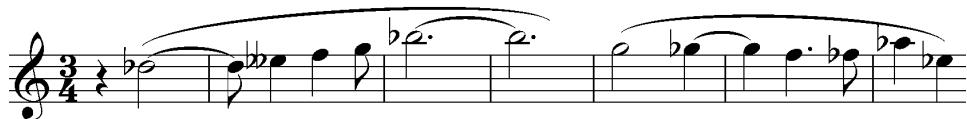




Example 5.34

The harmony here is also made up of dominant 7th chords – we begin on Ab7 before changing to Db7 with an added major 9th, accompanied here by a harp arpeggio. The change in texture – not dissimilar to the sudden simplification of texture and harmony heard at the beginning of the second subject in the Sixth Sonata – has a similar effect, drawing the listener in, the solo violin possibly creating a greater sense of intimacy.

A further connection may exist between the descending chromatic line, as found in the second subject area, and feminine seduction. This stems from ideas put forward by Smith (2005), who has also argued for the portrayal of masculine and feminine principles through musical means in Scriabin's Sonata No. 4, Op. 30 (1903), connecting – as I do – the masculine with active flight and the feminine with passive beauty. He goes on to suggest how a kernel of this gender polarity may be musically symbolised in the two melodic lines found in the opening bars of Sonata No. 4; the masculine rises in fourths whilst the feminine falls chromatically. Interestingly the 'rising' theme of the second subject area in Sonata No. 6 is followed by a similar, chromatically falling phrase:



Exmaple 5.35

Susan McClary has further argued – though not without opposition⁸⁹ – that falling chromatic lines such as these were a common way of portraying feminine seduction in nineteenth-century opera, and especially in the vocal lines of Bizet's *Carmen*. Interestingly, Smith explores in a similar vein such depiction of feminine seduction in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, and in particular in the chromaticism of the seductive sirens.

Smith comments that:

Looking closer at *Tannhäuser* we find that Venus herself becomes chromatic when *Tannhäuser* tries to break free. In actual fact it is the orchestral voice which becomes chromatic, imitating the bodily gestures behind Venus' purely diatonic and authoritative melody. We notice this most strongly in the music that accompanies Wagner's stage direction, "Venus, covering her face with her hands, turn passionately away from *Tannhäuser*, after a pause she turns to him again smiling, and with a seductive air." (2005).

It goes without saying that there are numerous examples of chromatic descending melodic lines which are *not* expressive of seduction. However, within the harmonic, textural, and dynamic context of the second subject area of Sonata No. 6, the falling melodic phrases are particularly beautiful, accompanied by dominant 7th derived harmonies and delicate grace note decorations. This interpretation is not just based on the cultural context of what musical patterns may have sounded seductive in the nineteenth-century, but hinges entirely on this expressive effect being achievable in practice.

5.7 The 'spells' motif

As the second subject area evolves, Scriabin introduces a new two note

⁸⁹ See Rosand (1990) and Higgins (1993-94).

melodic motif marked *charmes* or ‘spells’ in bar 56, which may be understood as derived from the top two notes of the repeated chords in bars 41-42 :



Example 5.36

The ‘spells’ motif, as I shall refer to it, is often heard in conjunction with the ‘rising dream’ theme and – in bars 56, 67 and 72 – is followed by a short silence, in the form of a quaver rest, after which the ‘rising dream’ theme is heard again in quavers:

Example 5.37

The connection with the repeated chords – as well as the ‘rising’ theme undergoing its first transformation immediately after the ‘spells’ motif is heard – leads me to interpret the ‘spells’ motif as Scriabin once again hinting at something more ominous under the surface. The ‘spells’ motif is eventually combined with the ‘rising dream’ theme, the falling augmented 5th being attached to the end, the newly transformed theme is given more rhythmic impetus by the quasi-canonical section that begins in bar 73, which increases the momentum that has been gradually growing in this section:



Example 5.38

I would argue that this has the effect of naturally, and almost imperceptibly, moving the music forward but without changing tempo: as if Scriabin is reveling in the seductive, alluring and intoxicating nature of the dream themes.

Due to its brevity, and more ‘vertical’ nature, the ‘spells’ motif is similar to the ‘call’ octave, and the repeated chords, and the sound with which I choose to play these two notes is considered within this context. The bars in which the ‘rising’ theme is accompanied by the ‘spells’ motif are always left hanging in the air – the ‘rising’ theme incomplete, not reaching its top note – the effect of which may be enhanced by the rest that follows. In my view this adds to the feeling of transformation as there is something slightly unexpected about the incomplete ‘rising’ theme and the hiatus that follows. After the rest, the ‘rising’ theme is heard again, this time in full and rhythmically altered, continuing to its top note. The two ‘spells’ pitches can add to this slightly strange interruption by ensuring that the sound used is noticeably different to that of the ‘rising’ theme, and I would suggest a different touch – as well as a different visible, physical gesture – may help here. Playing from the key, but upwards at the same time creates a physical gesture which is more vertical in movement, as well as helping to draw a more bell-like, yet soft sound from the piano – heard in bars 55-56 in audio example 9 (2015). It may also help to create a sonic and visual sense of the articulation marks, which suggest a longer, yet separated articulation. If the following rest is

allowed to really ‘speak’ by the stopping of the sound, but with an upward gesture, then this may give the visual impression of something subtle, yet new and unexpected, occurring.

5.8 The re-emergence of the Masculine Principle: Influence of live performance on research conclusions

Another way Scriabin achieves the gradual transition from second to third subject areas is through the progressive rhythmic diminution of the ‘rising’ theme. Rhythmically, this theme is in itself made up of decreasing note values and this, along with the use of syncopation, causes a forward impulse to be latent from its very first statement:



Example 5.39

Tracing the rhythmic development of this theme from bar 39 onwards, it is heard in increasingly diminished rhythmic versions, beginning in bars 57, 68 and 73 where all but the last note are made quavers, before being transformed in bar 82 into a much faster demisemiquaver figure marked *avec entrainement* – or ‘with impulse’ – this description perhaps now alluding to a connection with the masculine element:





Example 5.40

My early approaches to the rhythmic transformation of the 'rising' theme were inspired by Sviatoslav Richter's live recording (1952) in which he allows the second subject area to gradually gain momentum; the rhythmic diminutions organically integrated into a gradual increase of tempo. This is a recording that I still hold in the highest regard, and an interpretation that I think can work convincingly. However my work with the Norwegian pianist Hakon Austbo, and his superb recording of this work (1990), have since caused me to reconsider this interpretative choice. My current opinion is that a more effective choice is for the above demisemiquaver figure to emerge suddenly, so as to capture its fast, 'impulsive' character, as a sort of sudden awakening of consciousness following the previous, intoxicating section. To do so, the tempo of the second subject area must be maintained. My reinterpretation of the way the above demisemiquaver figure operates in this section also fits better with regard to my research into the feminine/masculine symbols in the *Prefatory Act*, and Scriabin's musical symbolism of this dualism, as there is greater contrast of characterization between the fast and slow 'rising' figures. Furthermore, it has had a knock on effect in the section which follows, in which I have come to interpret alternating fast and slow figures as a sort of musical dialogue, as discussed below.

After the sudden emergence, perhaps awakening, of the fast 'rising' figure in bar 82, the following passage alternates in a 'dialogue' between faster and slower material, my interpretation of which was first formed during a live performance in the

summer of 2015, having not previously thought of this section as a dialogue in any sense. I would argue that, though this interpretation was seemingly formed spontaneously, it was in fact deeply rooted in my research into the *Prefatory Act*; as such, the notion of the different masculine and feminine characters was very much present in my mind. Before the performance, which took the form of a lecture-recital, I had also introduced the work with reference to these characters and the qualities I perceive in them, as well as demonstrating the relevant musical material. Below I have attempted to detail the way in which this section may be heard and performed as a dialogue, as well as how such a reading may relate to aspects of the *Prefatory Act*.

Interestingly, the ‘rising dream’ theme is made up of the same pitch collection as the short, fast, rising impulsive gesture:



Example 5.41

It is curious why Scriabin chose the same melodic material for two musical ideas so different in rhythmic character. One explanation lies in the *Prefatory Act* libretto and in Scriabin’s theosophical interpretation of spirit and matter in relation to the duality of masculine and feminine. Scriabin’s description ‘the dream takes shape/form’ which accompanies the second subject area could be interpreted as referring to the manifestation of the feminine as matter in the lower, more differentiated levels of the

evolution cycle. Such a reading fits nicely with the notion of the sonata displaying a seven-stage compositional structure. Furthermore, in the *Prefatory Act*, the Feminine Principle presents herself as the Masculine Principle's dream, singing that she is '[the masculine principle's] dream about the future universe / One of the bonds of dual being'. This suggests that the feminine and masculine are inherently bound, two poles of the same duality, their significant difference being the type of energy they display – i.e. active and passive – and it would therefore make sense to symbolise them through the same melodic material, but with contrasting rhythmic energy.

Further support to this interpretation may be found in the lines, the Feminine Principle sings:

You fill everything with yourself
I do not exist, only you transpire [the masculine principle]
When in the light beams of your dream
I, glittering arise
As an image of new beauty
Thus condemning to life
Swarms of fancies, choirs of visions
Assemblies of shimmering worlds.

Scriabin's notion that the image of the Feminine Principle 'condemns to life' is logical as she is also a symbol of death, which is a concept of the material world, the horror of which is revealed in the third subject area after the mask of 'glittering' beauty has been lifted.

In the Masculine-Feminine dialogue – bars 82-91 – the masculine, impetuous, rising figure is answered twice by the slow, feminine, 'rising' theme.⁹⁰ It may be noticed that the slow 'rising' theme has lost its first note, which emphasises a different relationship between harmony and the melody: the melodic line now starting a minor 9th above the harmonic root, one of the most important intervals in the 'horror' chord.

⁹⁰ I also have described the 'winged' figure found towards the beginning of the work as a symbol of the masculine. One possible further interpretation of why there may be more than one symbol of the masculine within this work is put forward by Sergei Vartanov (2016) who essentially suggests that they represent the masculine, or spirit, on different theosophical planes of existence.

The examples below show the dialogue in full, followed by a reduction of bars 84, 85 and 88, compared to versions of the ‘horror’ chord:

‘Masculine’

‘Feminine’

‘Masculine’

‘Feminine’

Example 5.42

Example 5.43

With regard to the notion that the ‘dialogue’ in this passage connects the previous second subject area with the more ominous and terrifying material of the third subject area, the following lines, sung by the Masculine Principle, may be of significance:

Impart to me, how to take wing to you, desired one
Infatuating me with the glitter of your light beams
Where is your chamber, illuminated with magical light
Hear my plea and reveal to me death's secret.

The infatuation with the Feminine Principle – presented here as glittering and magical – supports the idea that the Feminine Principle is intoxicating and alluring, and the word ‘magical’ could even be linked with the notion of ‘spells’, as found in the preceding section. The final line suggests that death is in fact desired, however its revelation – as described later in the text, and discussed in Chapter 2 – is at first terrifying, as represented by the harmonies of the third subject area.

From a performance perspective, this passage brings to mind the short exchanges between the Masculine and Feminine Principles as found in the opening section of the *Prefatory Act* libretto, some of which I have quoted above. In order to sound like a musical dialogue, each contrasting theme must be characterized carefully, so as to give the impression that one is responding or reacting to the other, my interpretation of which can be heard in audio example no. 10 (2016). The masculine figure is played fast and impetuous, each five-note figure played with a slight crescendo, but also lightly so as to give the idea of flight, and the end of the masculine phrases in bars 84 and 88 are almost dry, with no pedal overhanging into what follows, the phrase ending as impulsively as it began, ensuring maximum contrast between the two characters. The first feminine phrase – bars 84-86 – is played with a lingering rubato, lots of pedal and a diminuendo, so as to enable the sound of the melody to ‘melt’ into the harmony sustained in the pedal. The second feminine phrase is played more suggestively, with a crescendo to the first beat of bar 89, which may hint at what is to come, whilst enabling the performer to show and connect the rising semitone in the top part in bars 89-91.

Though it is conceivable that another artist might perform this passage in a way

to suggest similar qualities to my own interpretation, without undertaking research, I don't believe this renders the research and analysis I have undertaken irrelevant, in this case research and analysis – both of the score and of my performance – have been used to support and explain particular performative choices. I would not have been able to reach my current performance interpretation without the research background.

5.9 The revelation of horror

After these two exchanges follows a minor third circle consisting of an arpeggiated figure marked *ailé, tourbillonnant* – ‘winged, turbulent’ – in which the ‘rising’ figure is further rhythmically diminished into an arpeggiated chord, minus one note:



Example 5.44

The top melodic line of this passage may also be enharmonically derived from the same rising theme, the third and fourth pitches swapped around, as well as bearing a resemblance to the ‘b’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ theme:



Example 5.45

The ‘rising’ theme is ingeniously used here to form part of the accompaniment, the harmony changing in minor thirds far more frequently now:

A musical score for piano in 2/8 time, featuring two staves. The top staff uses a treble clef and the bottom staff uses a bass clef. The key signature changes from G major (no sharps or flats) to F# major (one sharp) at the beginning of measure 8. Measure 8 starts with a forte dynamic. Measure 9 begins with a crescendo, indicated by 'cresc. poco a poco'. Measures 8 and 9 contain sixteenth-note patterns with grace marks. Measure 10 continues the sixteenth-note patterns. Measure 11 starts with a forte dynamic. Measure 12 concludes the section.

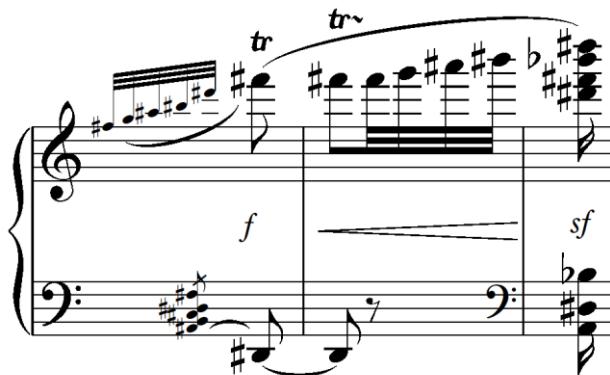
Example 5.46

It is significant that Scriabin does not mark a change in tempo in the above passage, but instead changes time signature from 3/8 to 2/8. From a performance point of view, a change in momentum is created compositionally, the change in time signature effectively shortening the length of the phrases. The use of a minor third circle may be understood as similar to other instances of this progression – as discussed in Chapter 4 – and representative of transformation; Scriabin increases the frequency of harmonic change so as to create an increase in forward momentum, the harmonies changing every two bars and then one.

In practice, I would argue that the ‘winged’ and ‘turbulent’ character of this passage may be created, not through a change of tempo, but through dynamic inflection – each phrase being dynamically ‘shaped’ or phrased towards the third chord as goal. The character is also created and enhanced by the change in texture as the ‘rising’ dream theme is incorporated into the left hand. If inflected with a slight crescendo, this rising figure may intensify the ‘winged’ and ‘turbulent’ character as the passage continues. As discussed in Chapter 4, the notion of constant circular transformation has influenced my decisions regarding performance, particularly in relation to tempo, and in this respect the emerging horror is not an arrival but a

'revelation'.

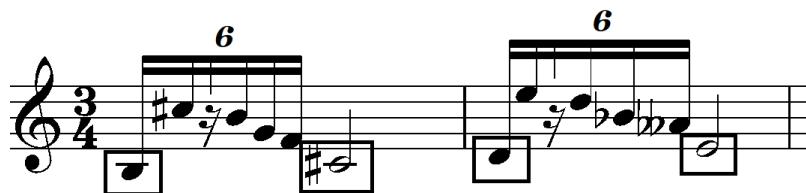
Following the minor third circle, the 'rising' theme is completely transformed in bars 102-103 into an extremely impetuous and energised gesture, now incorporating a trill as the section draws towards its climax. The harmony at the top of this gesture is a version of the 'horror' chord, the sound of which defines this section:



Example 5.47

I have come to interpret this as the point at which the other side of the seductive, pure and beautiful Feminine Principle is revealed. As already mentioned, the 'restrained warmth' theme of the wave-chain is also used in a different form in this section with a falling counterpart, its rising outline similar to that of the 'angular' masculine figure shown earlier, and possibly connecting this rising line with the masculine element:





Example 5.48

The counter line creates a reflection of the top melodic line, both starting from Db, perhaps musically representing a separation, or differentiation: if the overall sonata-form structure is understood as representing the seven stages of theosophical evolution, it is at this point – leading from stage 3-4 – that the spirit takes material, differentiated form, leading to life and its counterpart, death.

After this build up the music reaches its first climax and death is symbolised by four repeated ‘horror’ chords – or bells. Interestingly, the bells are accompanied by the description ‘the horror surges forward/rises up’ which suggests continued movement – similar to ‘the dream takes form’ – and may further support the notion of continued transformation inspired by the concept of a circle.

Part B
The Closing of the Circle:
Development, recapitulation and the embracing of evil in dissolution and dance

Whereas Part A was concerned with the revelation of horror, Part B considers the way in which this darkness is incorporated into other harmonic and melodic material, culminating in a Dionysian ‘delirious dance’, in which Scriabin appears to revel in the symbolism of dark forces. In the following Part B I consider how ideas discussed in Part A may be extended further into the development and recapitulation, including the notion of musical dialogue, as well as how Scriabin develops his thematic material through textural and harmonic means. Throughout I will continue to relate the music to specific aspects of the *Prefatory Act*, whilst considering the role that practice plays in this process.

5.10 Thematic Sequence – further dialogue?

Working within the interpretation of a ‘Theosophy-inspired’ circular compositional structure made up of seven stages, the development section relates to the fourth stage; characterised by material consciousness, in which there is most differentiation between individual elements. This interpretation is supported by the way in which Scriabin moves quickly from one thematic idea to another; within the first 17 bars of the development (bars 124-140), Scriabin presents us with seven of the main thematic elements of the work so far, as well as several different versions of the mystic chord. In this way the music is constructed in ‘blocks’, changing texture suddenly and frequently.

In the development, Scriabin mixes many of the thematic elements I presented in Part A of this chapter. Melodically, the ‘rising dream’ theme is most prevalent –

presented in many different rhythmic forms, including its original form (as in bar 132-133), a rhythmically faster, ‘darker’ version (as in bar 124), and as the masculine, rising, ‘impulsive’ theme (as in bars 126-127). In addition, Scriabin transforms the various thematic elements in several ways:

- By layering two or more melodic ideas together.
- By presenting the same theme with contrasting harmonies.
- By changing texture.
- By changing quickly from one thematic ‘block’ to another, and repeating this sequence, but transposed.

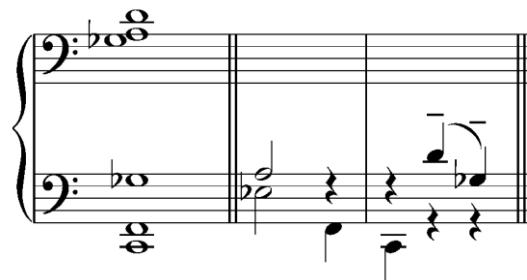
Scriabin employs all of these methods from the very start of the development section, creating what I will term a ‘thematic sequence’: a series of different thematic ideas presented in a certain order, or sequence, which is then repeated and transposed.⁹¹ The first sequence starts by layering the ‘strange, winged’ theme and a faster version of the ‘rising dream’ theme together. This is followed by a slowing down of the ‘rising dream’ theme which is now harmonised with a version of the ‘horror’ chord:

Example 5.49

Similarly to bars 82-91, this has the potential to form a dialogue with the following statement of the fast ‘rising’ theme in bars 126-127, the only difference being that the

⁹¹ A similar process is employed the development sections of the Seventh and Eighth Sonatas.

earlier exchange starts with the fast, masculine theme, rather than the slower, feminine theme. In bars 128-131, the first exchange is repeated and transposed up a fourth, with one difference: the bass interval of the first block is altered to a perfect fourth, rather than a tritone, which means that the harmony reached is not so closely related to the ‘horror’ chord, but is a mix of the ‘horror’ chord and a ‘pure’ dominant 7th – an F7 related harmony in this instance. The harmony still contains a minor 9th (between F and Gb), and it is possible to create this harmony by taking the F7 basis and adding the two notes of the ‘spells’ motif, in this case D and Gb, such as found in bars 132-133:



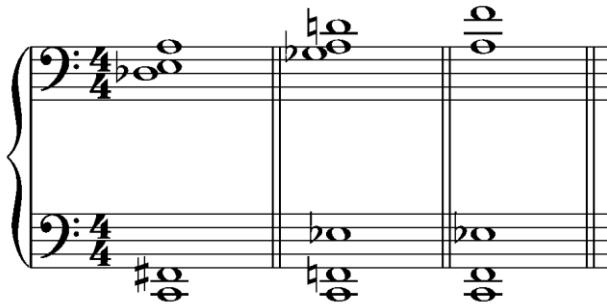
Example 5.50

A further statement of the fast ‘rising’ theme follows in bars 130-131, after which Scriabin presents the slow ‘rising dream’ theme in its original form, now harmonised with a harmony which may be understood as relating to F7, the D-Gb ‘spells’ motif is also included:

The musical example shows a soprano line with a treble clef and a bass line with a bass clef. The soprano line is labeled *sotto voce*. The bass line is labeled *charmes*. The music consists of three measures. Measure 1: Soprano G, bass F. Measure 2: Soprano F, bass E. Measure 3: Soprano E, bass D.

Example 5.51

In this section the slow ‘rising’ theme has undergone a gradual harmonic and textural transformation: harmonised with a version of the ‘horror’ chord, an altered version of this chord, and the original simple dominant 7th harmony, the three harmonies presented below:



Example 5.52

From a performance perspective, there is potentially a lot of drama in this passage. However in my earlier performances of this work, I felt particularly uncomfortable in the *lento* bars of this section, where there is nothing more than a held single harmony, and also unsure about the music stopping and starting every couple of bars – worried how an audience would follow what was happening musically. My research into this work as a whole – and in particular the notion of differentiation and dialogue in this passage – has helped to reconcile this discomfort, and has made me more convinced not only of the way I approach this section in practice, but also of the way Scriabin fundamentally presents his musical ideas.

Audio example no. 11 (2015) presents one possible performance of this section. This passage has a certain drama – especially as it comes out of the previous, terrifying climax – and this lies in the sudden changes of character and tempo, as well as in the long, *lento* chords, which I had previously felt uncomfortable performing. I voice the opening bar of this passage – bar 124 – to the F# in the left hand, so as to

bring the ‘rising’ theme to the fore. It is likely, given the comparative register of the right hand figure, that the ‘strange, winged’ figure will still be heard, and I shape this in the same way as in the exposition, inflecting towards the last note of the figure – in this case F#. The ‘rising’ figure in the left hand is rhythmically altered during the 2nd beat into a quintuplet and in practice I have found that the fact there is nothing played on the exact half beat – as well as the ‘rising’ figure no longer starting on the beat – leads me to naturally push through this beat a little, making a slight crescendo as I do so. Though not written, I would argue that this makes musical sense as it draws attention to the third beat of the bar, in which the chord is gradually sustained and another – now tritone related – entry of the ‘rising’ theme is heard in the right hand. I dynamically exaggerate the first C-Db semitone of the final entry of the ‘rising’ theme – which is accompanied by a version of the ‘horror’ chord – so as to draw attention to, and voice out the minor ninth created between the bass C and the Db, which will be held as part of the long *lento* chord in bar 125, hopefully creating a ‘darker’ voicing.

Throughout the various performances I have given of this work over the last few years, I have found it increasingly convincing and effective to hold the *lento* chords, almost as if there were a pause written. I have countered my concern regarding the possibility that the audience may be puzzled, by making sure that physically I do not allow the tension of this moment to subside – not technical tension, but rather the maintaining of a visually focused, intense physical state. In my case, this often amounts to leaning forward over the piano, and sustaining the tension of the moment by moving very slowly with my arms, which may also give the illusion that the chord is sustaining, rather than decaying. The following statement of the fast ‘rising’ figure can then enter far more suddenly, perhaps creating the impression of something answering impulsively.

The ‘b’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ theme is also found within the thematic sequence, towards the end of bar 131 in the lowest voice – connecting the fast ‘rising’ figure in bars 130-131 with the following statement of the slow ‘rising dream’ melody in bars 132-133 – and this may lend further support to my interpretation that the themes of the ‘wave chain’ act as transitional themes, linking the different energy levels, and characters, of the masculine and feminine elements. Playing the arpeggio as written in bar 131 – at the bottom of which the ‘b’ element begins – is extremely technically challenging. This awkwardness, as well as my desire to bring out the ‘b’ element – it is marked *piano*, and the preceding fast ‘rising’ figure is marked *pianissimo* – has led me to make a slight rearrangement, as can be heard in audio example no. 12 (2015). I play the top three notes of the arpeggio and *then* the bottom note, continuing on as written. In order to achieve this in a way which still maintains a sense of the underlying rhythm, the top three notes of the arpeggio must begin slightly early, the movement involved in returning to the bottom note – which I play with a second finger – adds a natural stress to the Gb, following which a natural *diminuendo* leads the music into the following ‘rising dream’ statement.

After hearing the ‘rising dream’ theme in bars 132-133, the thematic sequence continues with the ‘rising dream’ theme repeated in quavers, but this time leading to a version of the very opening mystic chord:



Example 5.53

The ‘rising dream’ theme has so far been harmonised with the ‘horror’ chord, a ‘pure’ dominant 7th, and now with the opening ‘mystic’ chord. As can be seen above, the rising semitone, which has so far been prevalent throughout the work, is heard in the left hand in the inner voice – Ab-Bbb. I try to gently inflect this figure – audio example no. 13 (2015) – in order to create a sense of forward impulse going into the next bars, in which the opening mystic chord is combined with the ‘angular’ theme and the octave ‘call’ motif – now marked *appel mysterieux* – the ‘angular’ theme taking precedence, alternating between tritone transpositions:

Example 5.54

The whole thematic sequence is then repeated, transposed up a semitone, the only addition being a more insistent octave ‘call’, this time with a repeated octave in bars 154-155:

Example 5.55

I have come to understand the different characters that the music changes between in the thematic sequence as different energy levels, as first suggested in Chapter 2 with regard to the various energy levels of the Masculine and Feminine Principles, and the Waves. In similar fashion, the ‘rising’ theme is presented in various guises, harmonised in various ways, and in different rhythmic and tempo contexts. Whilst I have been critical of my past tendency to over-characterise, I would argue that this exaggerated sense of characterisation is desirable in this particular passage in order to bring out the drama created through sudden changes of energy – manifested in practice by such choices as lingering on the statement of the ‘rising’ dream theme in bar 132-133, pausing for longer on the *lento* chords in bars 125 and 129, and allowing for sudden changes in tempo and energy at bars 126 and 137.

5.11 The ‘dual-climax’ – a comparison of two recorded performances

In the section that follows the two ‘thematic sequences’, Scriabin further develops the various characteristics of the ‘rising’ theme, enhanced through textural transformation, and resulting in two central climaxes. I discuss below how such an understanding may be made manifest in practice – as well as how practice has, in part, led to this interpretation. I also suggest how the two climaxes may be interpreted as possibly relating to the notion of an underlying theosophical influence, and use a comparison of my two recorded performances to suggest some ways in which the inter-relatedness of research, analysis and practice – as carried out in the interim period and beyond – has led to a rethinking of the effectiveness of certain performance choices.

In bars 158-170, the two thematic sequences are followed by a full statement of the opening of the ‘dream’ section, which is melodically the same as bars 39-49 but

transposed down a diminished 4th, the only addition being a repetition of the ‘falling dream’ theme in bars 164-166. The main difference lies in the texture, which in the latter is fuller and more complex. Scriabin’s description here is very significant to my interpretation – translating as ‘more and more impulsively, with enchantment’ – and may be understood as referring to the growing allure and eroticism of the ‘rising’ and ‘falling dream’ themes, as well as the increasingly corruptive and dangerous seduction of the Feminine Principle:

Example 5.56

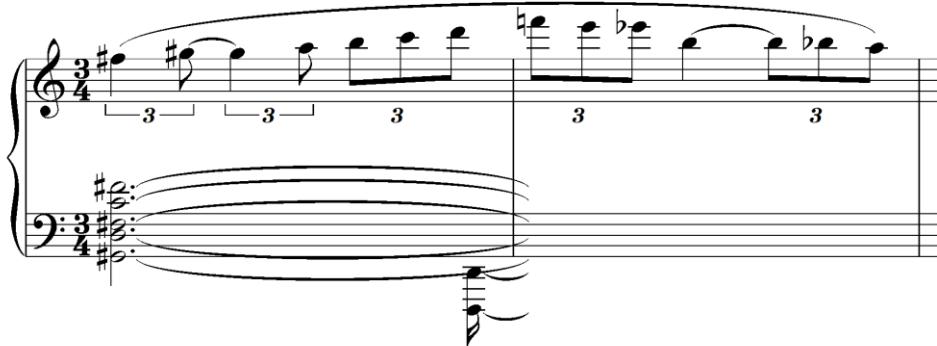
I remember this section vividly from when I first attempted to read the work. Before knowing anything of Scriabin's metaphysical world – and most likely even before knowing the translation of *de plus en plus entraînant, avec enchantement* – I was struck by the sensuousness of the semiquaver 'rising' figures, and the way these were incorporated 'within' the more slowly moving melodic line. I remember experimenting with the different dynamic layers of the texture, and relishing the effect that could be achieved by playing the semiquaver 'rising' figures really soft.

This is an approach that I still follow, as it allows the longer notes of the slower 'rising' theme to be heard, and potentially enables a better audible melodic connection between the first and second notes of the slower 'rising' theme. Another, retrospective reason in support of this choice is my interpretation that this section primarily relates to the increasingly seductive nature of the Feminine Principle. The semiquaver 'rising' figures not impetuous, like the demisemiquaver version, but rather sensuous and undulating, the sustaining pedal playing a critical role here in allowing the various layers of the texture to blend. The 'spells' motif may also help to maintain a sense of the pulse, and to offset the syncopated right hand melody notes.

Another example of an interpretative idea found through practice relates to the rising semitone figure that may be brought out in bars 177 and 179, and which exists between the first of the four grace notes and the lowest note of the right hand chord – F-G_b and A_b-B_{bb} respectively. I discovered this possibility in practice due largely to the fact that I play both of these notes with the thumb, and have found that this makes it quite comfortable to accent them slightly. Whilst not written explicitly in the score, this may add to the sense of growing rapture and energy, as well as possibly creating an impulsive gesture through the inflection it lends the grace notes, as is demonstrated in audio example no. 14 (2016).

I have already discussed in Chapter 4 the use of a minor third circle in this section (bars 168-179), and have put forward my thoughts regarding how this has resulted in my current decision not to increase tempo. A further reason for this is the rhythmic speeding up of the faster ‘rising’ figure in bars 170, 172 and 174, naturally creating more momentum, in addition to the speeding up of the frequency of the harmonic changes. In my earlier 2009 performance of this section (bars 158-197) – audio example no. 15 – I allowed the music to accelerate considerably, with the purpose of creating greater excitement and sense of forward direction. In the 2015 recording – audio example no. 16 – I largely maintain the same tempo throughout, allowing the music to naturally gain the feeling of increased momentum. Aside from notions of circular structures, another reason for this choice lies in my consideration of the implications of the difference between the music becoming excited, and becoming *enchanted* – as found in Scriabin’s description ‘more and more impulsively, with enchantment’. Through experimenting in practice, I have made the judgement that not increasing tempo in this section creates a greater sense of ‘enchantment’; the music becoming ‘ecstatic’, rather than ‘excited’.

The development section provides the work with a central climax that has two significantly distinct climatic moments, which may support a theosophical understanding of this work. The prevalence of the ‘rising’ theme in the preceding sections is clear, however after the initial build up in bars 158-179, the ‘rising’ theme is not heard again until bar 198, after the dual-climax which is formed from the ‘wave chain’ themes – bars 180-197 – and most notably the ‘restrained warmth’ theme. The first climax occurs in bars 180-181 and bars 184-185, and a reduction is shown below of its principal harmonic and melodic content:



Example 5.57

The ‘restrained warmth’ theme is now anything but ‘restrained’, Scriabin adding the description ‘joyous, triumphant’; orthographically its harmonic root may be understood as D. In bars 192-193 the same theme is used at a second climactic point, a similar reduction is shown below:

Example 5.58

Whilst the melodic content is the same, it is notated enharmonically differently, which may be interpreted as connecting the harmony to Ab/G# rather than D. In addition, the harmony which begins the second statement of the ‘restrained warmth’ theme is a version of the ‘horror’ chord, whereas the harmony which accompanies the first climax is far more closely related to the harmony heard in the very first statement in bar 11-12.

In a similar harmonic transformation, the ‘breath’ element of the ‘wave-chain’ is

altered harmonically, first moving to a ‘pure’ dominant 7th in bar 183, and then to a version of the ‘horror’ chord in bar 187:

Example 5.59

The use of the ‘wave chain’ themes at, arguably, the most extensively climatic point of the work, further supports my argument for a connection between these themes and the ‘Waves’ of the *Prefatory Act*, the change in harmony accompanying these themes suggesting an ‘oscillation’ from light to dark.

During the build up to the second climax in bars 188-192, Scriabin harmonises the ‘restrained warmth’ theme using the major/minor harmonies from the octatonic scale, similar to the harmonisation found in the earlier ‘horror’ section; the left hand accompaniment figure also akin to the earlier statement, Scriabin perhaps alluding to this connection in the accompanying description in bar 190: ‘gathering of mysterious

forces'. The repetition of the first four notes of the 'restrained warmth' theme may also be interpreted as rhythmically alluding to the 'rising dream' theme:



Example 5.60

In terms of bars, the peak of the second climax in bar 193 occurs exactly half way through the piece and this is significant with regard to the notion of a seven-stage compositional structure that is in some way symbolic of theosophical evolution. If so, then the development section represents the fourth stage, and is therefore the stage in which elements are most differentiated, and at the end of which the evolution back to spiritual unity begins. Returning to Scriabin's colour-harmony association – in which spectral 'material' colours are associated with harmonies that have roots C, D, E, G, A, B and extra-spectral, 'spiritual' colours are connected with roots Db, Eb, F, Gb, Ab, Bb – I would argue that this may be the reason for Scriabin's change of orthography, as well as his change of harmonisation between the two climatic points. The first is related to root D, which is connected to a 'material' colour, the second is connected to root Ab, which is 'spiritual' and occurring exactly half way, makes it the turning point in the circle.

The polarity between the harmonies with root Ab and D is further displayed in Scriabin's orthography for the descent from the peak of the second climax, where he changes the enharmonic notation, alternating between root Ab and root D, eventually ending up on a full version of the 'horror' chord:

Example 5.61

The significance of this passage lies not just in its central position but also in the notion alluded to earlier regarding the embracing of dark forces as a necessary counterpart to the mask of feminine beauty. Given the nature of the section from bar 158 to the first climax in bars 180-181 – in which the feminine second subject is presented within

sumptuous textures, and alluring trills and tremolandos – the ‘gathering of mysterious forces’ and the re-emergence of the ‘horror’ chord may be heard as echoing the layout of the exposition.

I have found in my own performances that the sudden drop in dynamic in bars 182-183 and 186 onwards, can be difficult to convey convincingly, as the energy level can seem to drop suddenly having just reached the first climax. I have found that in order to maintain the intensity of energy going into the second *forte* phrase, bars 184-185, it is important to maintain tempo and momentum throughout the *mezzo piano* bars (182-183), which is heard to the contrary in my 2009 live recording in which I not only slow down considerably in the two *forte* phrases, but loose energy in the *mezzo piano* bars (182-183 and 186 onwards). This decision was made in order to exaggerate the contrast between these bars, however I have come to reconsider this idea, and would argue that continuity should be maintained through tempo, whereas contrast can be created through the means of dynamic, voicing, and the change of texture. In both my 2009 and 2015 recordings, I bring out the repeated ‘call’ octaves in bars 183, 187 and 189. This is a very recognisable motif – a more ‘vertical’ sound, compared to the linear nature of much of the texture up until this point – and can be particularly striking and intense when heard within the context of these dynamically *mezzo piano* and *piano* bars. Harmonically in each of these bars the ‘call’ octave forms the interval of a minor 9th with the bass pitch – the minor 9th interval is a distinctive feature of the ‘horror’ chord – and bringing out the octave ‘call’ may exaggerate this interval.

In the section that follows, it may be interesting to note the textural, harmonic, and rhythmic allusion that may be inferred from bars 195-197, in which Scriabin fragments the falling part of the ‘restrained warmth’ theme into a six note falling figure

– notated as two sets of three falling chromatic pitches, related by a tritone, the interval I have previously suggested may represent Scriabin's notion of polarity, or duality:



Example 5.62

This fragmentation creates a sort of hemiola effect; the short phrases lasting for two crotchets within a three crotchet bar. This rhythmic effect, along with the left hand arpeggio figuration, draws an allusion to the 'delirious dance' that will be found in the closing coda:



Example 5.63

What follows at the end of the development is a return to the 'rising dream' theme, this time with Scriabin's description 'with excessive/exalted joy', and with the 'winged, angular' theme added to the progression which ends in a collapse into the recapitulation. I have already discussed the way in which Scriabin uses a minor third

circle here, quickening the rate of harmonic change as the music progresses, the recapitulation occurring in bar 206:

Recapitulation -----

Example 5.64

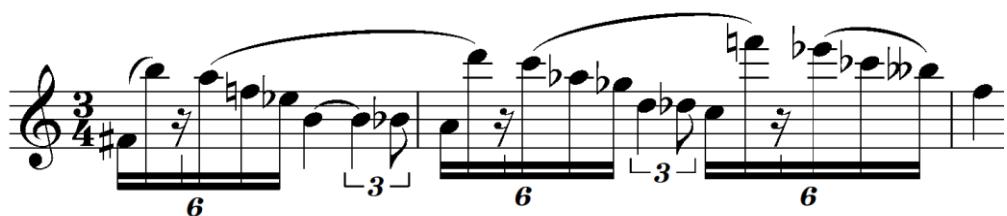
The falling phrases in bars 199 and 201, which answer the ‘rising’ phrases in bars 198 and 200, are noteworthy. Texturally, these falling phrases may be said as having a similar left hand accompaniment to the first statement of the ‘strange, winged’ figure – as heard in bars 9-10 – and the first statement of the ‘restrained warmth’ theme, in bars 11-12. A closer look at the melodic content of this falling phrase also leads me to suggest it may be melodically derived from the falling part of the ‘restrained warmth’

theme, compared here to the ‘restrained warmth’ theme as found in bar 194:



Example 5.65

I believe this to be one of the few examples in this sonata where Scriabin fragments one of his longer melodic ideas; themes are most commonly presented in full transpositions, within different textural, harmonic and temporal contexts. In a similar way in bars 201-203, the ‘strange, winged’ figure may be said to be combined with the falling chromatic part of the falling figure used in bars 199 and 201 – the chromatic descending line also similar to the ‘breath’ element of the ‘wave chain’ and the ‘falling’ phrase of the second subject ‘dream’ theme:



Example 5.66

The fragmenting of melody, and the speeding up of harmonic changes may all be exploited in performance by exaggerating the shortening of melodic phrases; audio example no. 17 suggests a possible realisation of this passage (bars 197-208).

From a physical point of view, I have always found the arpeggiated right hand chords in bars 199 and 201 to be technically hard to play with small hands (hence the wrong notes in my 2009 live recording!) and as a result I have come to consider taking a little more time over these arpeggios. The change of texture that follows can then be

exaggerated by a minimal use of pedal, possibly enabling the textural connection with the opening statement of the ‘strange, winged’ figure to be made audible. As already suggested in Chapter 4, the enraptured and ‘exalted’ character is partly created by Scriabin’s approach to phrasing and harmony in these bars.

One major difference that I hear between my two recordings lies in my treatment of the short pause after the second climax in bar 197. This brief moment of silence can potentially be very dramatic, partly due to the contrasting musical material it separates, and the fact that we have had no actual musical silence for some time. From experimenting in practice, I would argue that this sudden silence is made most dramatic if the tempo of the previous climaxes is not altered too much; the music retaining much of its momentum and making a sudden silence more unexpected.

Audio examples nos. 18 and 19 (2009 and 2015) present two approaches to this section (bar 190-208) and the difference is striking: in the 2009 performance I slow down considerably leading into the silence in bar 197, whereas in the 2015 recording I do the opposite. This slight speeding up maintains the energy of the previous section, rendering the silence which follows more unexpected, the music which follows in bar 198 sounds to me more ecstatic – the silence more ‘energised’ due to the increase in tempo. Conversely, the slowing down into the silence in bar 197 in the earlier performance causes the music to lose energy and momentum; the silence is more ‘prepared’, less unexpected, and less ‘energised’ – the music that follows doesn’t seem to emerge so seamlessly and ecstatically as a result. In this respect these recordings may be heard as demonstrating the longer-ranging effect that a choice regarding tempo can have on the dramatic effect of a section as a whole.

5.12 Recapitulation – dissolution

In the following section I consider how the recapitulation and closing coda of the Sixth Sonata may fit into my notion of a seven-stage circular compositional structure, with particular regard given to the musical depiction of dissolution and dance. I will suggest how the differences of dynamic, texture, and tempo in the recapitulation may be interpreted as relating to theosophical concepts – as explored previously in Chapters 2-4 – and I will consider throughout how such an interpretation has influenced my approach to this section in practice, as well as considering why the piano may lend itself so well to expressing the notion of dissolution.

From a harmonic, rhythmic and melodic point of view, the recapitulation of the first subject area is very similar to the exposition – except being transposed down a major second – the most obvious differences being heard in the textural transformation of the second subject area. Having said that, there are still some significant differences in the first subject area worthy of consideration.

Firstly, the recapitulation marks a transposed return to the opening material, but unlike the opening is preceded by two substantial musical climaxes; the structural context may therefore lead it to have a different dramatic effect. Rather than being perceived as an ‘awakening’ – as I have previously described the opening gesture – the recapitulation is accompanied by Scriabin’s description *effondrement subit* or ‘sudden collapse’; the ecstatic nature of the preceding build up stopped mid-flow. Despite this ‘sudden collapse’, Scriabin maintains some of the energy of the previous section. The recapitulation at bar 206 is far more dramatic than the opening, marked *forte*, and with the rising semitone figure now in accented octaves; the notes that make up the harmony at bar 206 contain all of the same relative pitches as the opening, but distributed slightly differently.

From a performance perspective, I have found the realisation of Scriabin's 'sudden collapse' to be difficult; after the momentum acquired in the previous section the tempo must slow up, but this can cause the music to grind to a halt. In Part A, I discussed the reasons for my reconsideration of a faster tempo at the opening, a choice which really makes sense to me at the recapitulation by not allowing the music to lose too much energy and still maintaining a sense of forward direction; the 'sudden collapse' also occurring partly through the change in texture.

If understood as relating to stages 5-7 of a Theosophy-inspired circular structure, the recapitulation and coda relate to the spiritually heightened ascent through globes E and F. Similarly, it is possible to consider certain aspects of the recapitulation as musically heightened, and transformed compared to the exposition. For instance, the recapitulation of the 'restrained warmth' theme is very different, this time marked *forte* and with greater rhythmic impetus, and more frequent changes of harmony:



Example 5.67

Given these changes, as well as the way this theme is previously heard to form the central climaxes of the development, I try to highlight these differences in practice by playing more impetuously – speeding up slightly and exaggerating the crescendo and diminuendo (audio example 20).

Overall the texture of the first subject area is fuller – the ‘restrained warmth’, ‘murmur’ and ‘caressing wave’ chain is repeated in octaves, for example:



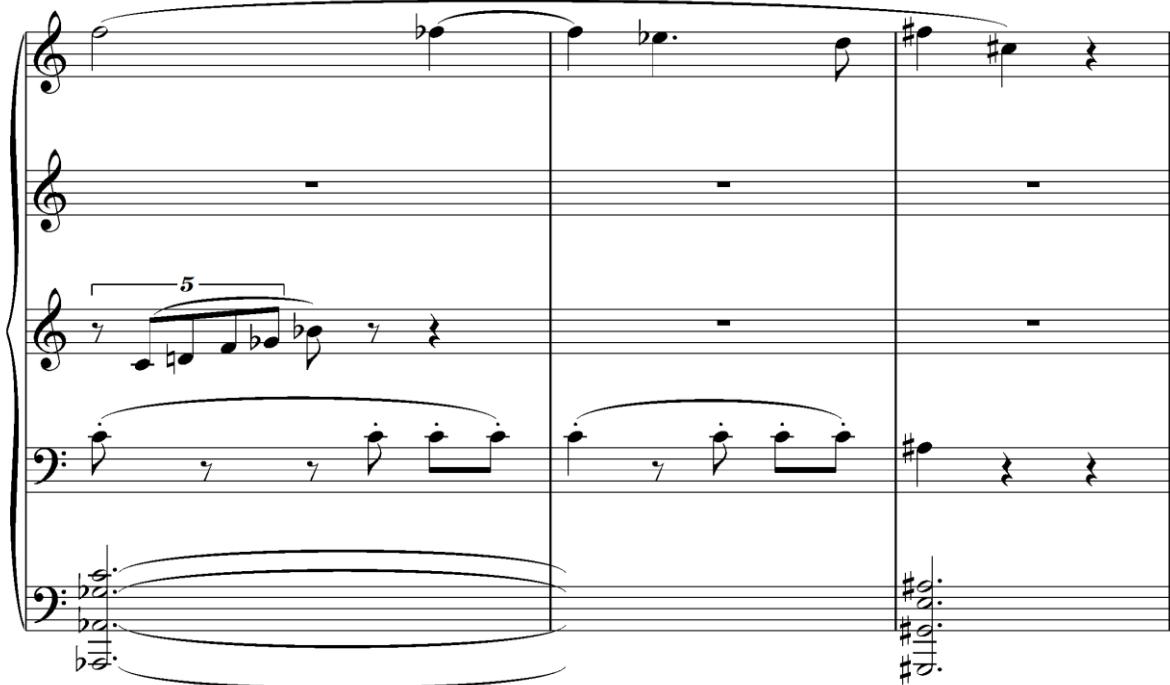
Example 5.68

From a purely practical point of view, this exaggeration, or ‘heightening’, of the experience of the recapitulation also makes sense, as it retains some of the energy of the preceding development section – in this way the effect of the recapitulation is considered in relation to what is heard beforehand.

This argument may be further expanded and demonstrated in relation to the recapitulation of the second subject area which retains its basic harmonic and thematic structure but is greatly transformed texturally. A reduction of this section can be seen below; the slow ‘rising’ theme is accompanied by lower, faster versions of the ‘rising’ theme, built gradually from the initial rising semitone. The ‘spells’ motive is also heard, as well as the repeated ‘horror’ chords – now heard as four repeated notes – as is a version of the ‘b’ element of the ‘caressing wave’ theme:

Musical score for orchestra, page 10, measures 11-12. The score consists of five staves. The top three staves are in treble clef (G), the bass staff is in bass clef (F), and the bottom staff is in bass clef (F). Measure 11 starts with a dynamic p . Measure 12 begins with a dynamic f . Measures 11-12 feature sixteenth-note patterns with grace notes and slurs. Measure 12 includes a melodic line with eighth-note pairs and sixteenth-note patterns.

Musical score for two staves. The top staff (Treble clef) has a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. It shows measures 3, 4, and 5. Measure 3 consists of three groups of three eighth notes each, with the first note of each group having a grace note. Measures 4 and 5 show eighth-note patterns with grace notes. The bottom staff (Bass clef) has a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 2/4. It shows measures 3, 4, and 5. Measures 3 and 4 have eighth-note patterns with grace notes. Measure 5 has six eighth notes. The score includes measure numbers and a tempo marking of 5.



Example 5.69

Garcia suggests that this section may symbolise the reintegration of the feminine into the mystic chord (2000). I agree that something is transformed in this section as the sound of this section is very different from the exposition, however I don't entirely agree with Garcia's interpretation that it is the Eternal Feminine which is transformed. I understand this section more as a simultaneous – multi layered – revelation, integration and dissolution of the 'pure' and 'dangerous' sides of Scriabin's Feminine Principle, along with the more rhythmically active Masculine figurations; the ecstasy of the development failed to fully achieve this layered texture, as the themes were presented linearly and led to the 'sudden collapse' of the recapitulation, which now presents as a transformed version of the exposition. These elements are 'dissolved' into a wash of sound created by the constant arpeggiation of the mystic chord in the sustaining pedal. A quote from the *Prefatory Act* seems particularly appropriate here, in which the Waves refer to the final dissolution as:

From an instant to eternity on the path to infinity
From stony gloom to radiant transparency

The ‘transparency’ may be created by being able to hear all of the thematic elements layered as detailed above. Due to the complexity of the texture, achieving a ‘transparent’ quality of sound is particularly challenging and requires a careful use of pedal techniques, as are detailed below.

It is the use of pedal in combination with the natural decay of the piano sound which can create the extraordinary effect of the music seemingly ‘dissolving’ into the underlying harmony – audio example 21 demonstrates a possible performance realisation of bars 244-267 (2015). How I construct this type of sound in practice is dependent on a very subtle use of pedal, including half pedals and flutter pedal, as well as very careful voicing of the individual textural layers. I have commented a number of times in this study on the importance of the sustaining pedal in realising Scriabin’s textures and in creating his unique sound world. Neuhaus wrote of the pedal that it is ‘an organic, integral and most important property of the piano, a part of its very nature, and to eliminate it altogether is tantamount to a merciless emasculation of our instrument’ (1973, p. 158), Rubinstein referring to it as the ‘soul of the piano’ (in Neuhaus, 1973, p. 156). Indeed, pedalling, in all its most subtle forms, is an indispensable part of the performance of Scriabin’s piano music, Neuhaus captures the range of pedal technique required beautifully, writing:

The use of pedal in Scriabin’s music should be extraordinarily rich, varied and sensitive ... perhaps nowhere else is such a variety of levels needed in pedalling, nowhere such rapid changes in half- and quarter-pedalling or the ability of the foot to keep up with sixteenths and thirty-seconds (1973, p. 166).

The music demands the performer to be skilled in an array of approaches to pedalling, and it is no coincidence that Scriabin himself was a master of such techniques. The conductor and pianist Vasily Safonov (1859-1918) reportedly told students at the Moscow Conservatoire whilst watching Scriabin perform ‘What are you looking at his

hands for? Look at his feet!' (in Neuhus, 1973, p. 166). It wouldn't be too far to suggest that Scriabin's music wouldn't have existed in the form it does without the sustaining pedal, nor without his own virtuoso pedalling abilities.

In the aforementioned passage, the flutter, half and quarter pedals are used to create transparency and textural clarity, without dryness – the extraordinary sounds must also be allowed to overlap, creating subtly more complex harmonies and overtones.⁹² The top line is rhythmically the slowest moving and therefore requires more sound than the other layers, creating definition between the layers; the lower layers sounding with greater clarity when heard against a more clearly defined top line. In addition, I have found that a slight staccato touch in all parts can help with regard to the ability to control the dynamic level of each layer. The dissolving of the melodic line may also be enhanced in such places as bars 262-263 where the upper melodic line is copied in an offset lower line, an octave lower and – as presented in audio example 22 (2016) – I have found that emphasising the underlying melodic line can create the effect of the sound of the upper line becoming lost – or dissolved – in the rhythmically offset lower line.

An important aspect of my interpretation of the second subject recapitulation lies in the idea that the beauty and horror found elsewhere in the sonata are here openly mixed together for the first time. In the exposition of the second subject area, the slow 'rising' theme is still kept somewhat separate from the repeated 'horror' chords, as found in bars 41-42 and 58-59, whereas in the recapitulation, the repeated 'horror' notes are now fully integrated into the texture, linked into the same linear voice as the 'b' element of the 'caressing wave' theme. Example 5.70 shows a reduction of

⁹² It is not possible to describe in precise detail *how* to pedal this passage, or the Sonata as a whole, due to the variance of pedal mechanism between different instruments, as well as the varying demands of various acoustics.

these two melodic lines, as found in the recapitulation of the second subject in bars 243-250:

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and 3/4 time. The bottom staff is in bass clef and 3/4 time. Both staves have a key signature of one sharp. Measure 1 begins with a rest followed by a quarter note. Measure 2 begins with a half note. The bass staff features eighth-note patterns in both measures.

Example 5.70

The position of the lower line – made up of the repeated ‘horror’ notes and ‘b’ ‘caressing wave’ element – within the texture means that it is nearly always played only by the left hand thumb, enabling this line to be brought out using the thumb’s natural weight.

Apart from the omission of 19 bars, the recapitulation of the second subject area is unaltered melodically in terms of pitch relation, simply transposed down a major 2nd. The principal, upper, melodic line in the recapitulation is altered slightly rhythmically, the basic proportions remain but the syncopated notes are now triplets rather than normal quavers. The reason for this is possibly to make the layers of the texture clearer and more audible; the repeated ‘horror’ notes move in quavers, so perhaps the melodic line is offset slightly so as to bring greater definition to the two parts.

The omission of 19 bars in the recapitulation may justify the choice of a slower tempo in this section than in the exposition, thus maintaining the same temporal proportions. In addition, the complexity of the piano writing in this section also *requires* a slower tempo than in the exposition; an attempt to play the exposition and recapitulation of the second subject at the same tempo results in either the exposition sounding much too slow, or the recapitulation becoming hurried and virtually unplayable from a pianistic perspective. This provides an example of how structural proportions are determined through performance, rather than score analysis; the change in tempo necessary in the recapitulation is not marked in the score, and a simple counting up of bars would seem to suggest that the second subject section in the recapitulation is shorter than the exposition, whereas in reality they are temporally very similar.

5.13 Coda – continued dissolution through delirious dance

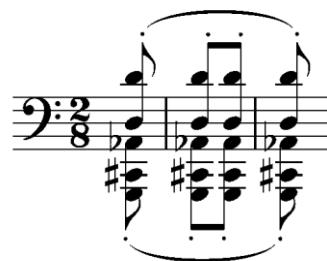
The closing coda may be interpreted as a development of the third subject area. As in the development section, Scriabin switches quickly from one thematic idea to another, and it is this aspect that I personally find most pianistically demanding, due to the constant traversing of the keyboard. A comparison of my two recorded performances of this work – audio examples nos. 23 and 24 (2009 and 2015) – uncovers a tendency in the 2009 performance to rush, especially through the difficult right hand trills, in which maintaining the pulse is difficult due to the absence of anything in the left hand on the down beat – see bars 308, 317, 319, 325. In addition, the large chords in the left hand – in such bars as 318, 320 and 326 – lead me to rush towards them, partly due to the fast ‘rising’ right hand figure which precedes them.

In the 2015 recording, I do not rush, but in order to compensate for this tendency

the tempo is slower than I currently prefer. Indeed the choice of tempo in this section can have a crucial impact on its effectiveness: it must be fast enough to capture the ‘delirious’ and ‘dance’ character of the music, but not so fast that it becomes muddled and rushed. In the following section I will consider possible solutions to these issues, as well as suggesting how I interpret the notion of ‘dance’ in this passage.

As in earlier sections, Scriabin composes aspects of the ‘delirious’ character into the music, especially in the way short melodic phrases are almost obsessively repeated. In this way, bars 304-330 and 335-362 may be understood as being formed by the alternation of four thematic ‘blocks’:

1. The repeated ‘horror’ chords:



2. Four repeated ‘bells’:



3. A trill followed by the fast ‘rising’ figure resulting in a version of the ‘horror’ chord:



4. Two chords in a fast, dotted rhythm, the outer parts of which move in contrary motion – the top line of which may be interpreted as relating to the outline of the ‘angular, winged’ figure:



The way in which Scriabin alternates between these blocks may be summarized as follows:

Bar number	Thematic block used
304-306	1
306-308	2
308-310	3
310-312	4
312-314	1
314-316	2
316-318	3
318-320	3
320-322	1
322-324	2

324-326	3
326-328	2
328-329	3

Table 5.1

As can be seen from the above Table 5.1, the highly energized third thematic block – the fast rising figure with trill – is used more frequently as the sequence goes on and the pitch rises. The same basic sequence is found in the second half of the coda, in bars 335-364, and the intensity required in this section comes largely from the quick alternation from one thematic block to another, in this respect greater intensity and drama may be created through maintaining the same tempo throughout.

A closer look at the above thematic blocks yields further possible thematic connections. The four repeated ‘bell’ chords – I have named them ‘bell’ chords as similar ‘bell-like’ chords are heard in bars 330-334 and 365-369 – are accompanied by a faster version of the ‘spells’ motif:



Example 5.71

If the alternating chords which make up the four ‘bells’ are written enharmonically, this reveals that they may be heard as relating to two dominant 7th chords, related by a tritone, the harmonies becoming mixed together if the sustaining pedal is used throughout. This is not the approach I used in my earlier 2009 performance – audio

example no. 25 – however I have since adopted a much more ‘pedaled’ approach, due in part to my emerging notion – based on my research findings – that these chords may represent a dissolution of two contrasting, ‘polarised’, tritone-related harmonies – hear audio example no. 26 (2015). The same is also true of the descending sequence of ‘bells’, heard in bars 330-334 and 365-369, both presented here enharmonically in Example 5.72:



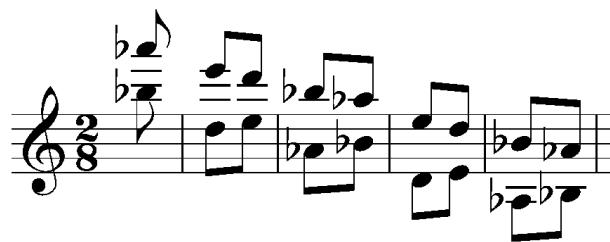
Example 5.72

Listening to the two recordings, there is a significant difference in how I play these descending ‘bell’ chords. In 2009 – audio example no. 27 – I was yet to think of them as bells, and the result is a far drier, less pedaled sound, my aim being to bring out the rhythmic character of the dance, whereas audio example no. 28 (2015) presents a far more pedaled, bell-like sonority.

Throughout my research I have come across the notion of bells several times – such as the bells that Scriabin suggested would be ‘suspended from clouds’ in the performance of the *Prefatory Act*. Anatole Leikin has suggested that bells may have been a source of inspiration for some of Scriabin’s compositional ideas, stating that ‘bell pealing constituted an integral part of Scriabin’s music. Bell-like sonorities saturate many of his compositions ... [including] the last sonatas’ (Leikin, 2002, p.44).⁹³

⁹³ Bell as a source of inspiration is also found in the Russian contemporaries of Scriabin, notably in the music of Rachmaninoff in works such as *The Bells* and the Piano Sonata no. 2 (Martyn, 1990). In

I have already commented on the way in which Scriabin mirrors a rising melodic line in a lower descending line in the third subject area – for instance, in bars 109-112 – and a similar mirroring effect may be found in the two descending bell sequences in the coda, which I have found to be helpful with regard to voicing these chords; the upper and lower voices of the right hand chords always moving in opposite motion:



Example 5.73

It is extremely challenging at speed to voice both the upper and lower notes of these chords, however I would advocate that doing so can make the sound of these chords more ‘bell’ like – perhaps due to the complexity of bell sounds, in which lower tones are heard alongside overtones.

In the above sequences of descending bells, Scriabin combines two different time signatures, the right hand being in 2/8 and the left in 3/8 and it may be possible to interpret this as a sort of unification of metre: the majority of the work, including the first and second subject areas are in 3/8 or 3/4, however the ‘horror’ section is in 2/8. One of the reasons for the lack of pedal in the 2009 recording is due to the desire to make this cross-rhythm audibly clear, by making the rests in the left hand very

addition I have come across bells as symbols in literature from the period, in particular Joris-Karl Huysmans' occult novel *Là-bas* (1891), which not only includes many references to the significance given to bells, but also includes an exploration of the medieval knight Gilles de Rais, a portrait of whom still hangs in Scriabin's Moscow apartment, painted by Scriabin's friend Nikolai Shperling. The novel explores occultism and the ‘dark sciences’, culminating in a description of the ‘black mass’.

apparent. I have since found it possible to play this passage with pedal, yet show the cross-rhythm effect, achieved partly through a slightly slower tempo, the use of half-pedals, and by the way the left hand accompaniment is inflected from the first note of the accompaniment figure, so as to make the start of each left hand arpeggio clear.

5.14 How does the coda ‘dance’?

In my early performance attempts at the coda, I had often struggled to feel convinced of the dance-like quality that Scriabin seems to allude to in his description ‘the horror surges and mingles with the delirious dance’. The main reason for my struggle was the heaviness created by the repeated ‘horror’ chords; the coda has little of the lightness which characterizes the dances which end the Eighth and Tenth Sonatas. My struggle with how the music of the coda should ‘dance’ has been largely quelled through certain aspects of my research into the *Prefatory Act* text, and in particular the section entitled *Dance-song of the fallen*. Sabaneev suggested that Scriabin composed the second of the *Deux Danses* op. 73, entitled *Flammes Sombres*, with this section of text in mind (Sabaneev, 1925) and I would now argue that this ‘dance’ shares similar qualities with certain aspects of the coda of the Sixth Sonata, most notably the rhythmically repeated chords, found as follows on the first and second beat of each bar, marked *tumultueux*:

Example 5.74

Scriabin's marking *désordonné* – meaning ‘messy’ or ‘disorderly’ – is perhaps similar to the delirium referred to in the Sixth Sonata’s coda. Scriabin reportedly suggested to Sabaneev (1925) that the chords in the *Poème op. 73 no. 2* were ‘stamping’, a sort of primal, ritualistic type of dance – perhaps comparable to aspects of Najinsky’s choreography for Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du Printemps*. Whilst I have suggested that Scriabin’s repeated ‘horror’ chords in Sonata No. 6 may be interpreted as bells, they nonetheless display a similar ‘vertical’ quality to the ‘stamping’ chords of *Flammes sombres*, and I have found this interpretation to be valuable with regard to what type of dance this music may represent.

Another aspect of dance that I have considered in the coda is the idea of upward and downward movement. An example of an upward movement may be the fast ‘rising’ figure and trill, which results in a *sforzando* chord and this has led me to take the decision to play this *sforzando* chord with little or no pedal, so it doesn’t ring like a bell. This, combined with the fact that this is a rising musical gesture, may help to create the effect of an ‘upward’ movement; the small, almost imperceptible, silence which this creates before the following repeated ‘horror’ chords also helps to slightly separate these two gestures. So as to imitate the idea of stamping, I play the four repeated ‘horror’ chords with no inflection, similar perhaps to four identical vertical movements, and have come to understand this dance as in no way elegant or graceful; it is cast in the same character as the primal, grotesque brutality which characterizes works such as Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, though the Sixth Sonata predates Stravinsky’s masterpiece.

The ‘delirious’ character, which Scriabin alludes to, is perhaps created through the relentlessness of the music – comparable with the final sacrificial dance of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Having studied and performed Stravinsky’s ballet in his own arrangement for piano duet, I have come to feel more and more strongly that a similarity exists between the final sacrificial dance and Scriabin’s coda, stemming from the use of musical ‘blocks’. In Stravinsky’s case, this is further enhanced through contrast of orchestration, however Scriabin achieves a similar effect through the constant changing of register. Below shows the ‘blocks’ that I perceive as making up the opening of the ‘Sacrificial Dance’:

Example 5.75

It is not my intention here to offer an analysis of Stravinsky's dance, but to highlight the similarity I perceive between Scriabin's and Stravinsky's dances, and to suggest how this similarity has formed a part of the research and interpretation process.

Performing and studying *Le Sacre du Printemps* has occurred at the same time as this present study of Scriabin's Sonata No. 6, and has played a role in my emerging

understanding of Scriabin's 'final dance', particularly with regard to how to most effectively bring out its relentless and primal qualities, and how these characteristics may be enhanced through absolutely maintaining tempo throughout. In my earlier recording – audio example no. 23 (2009) – can be heard a far greater freedom of rubato, and especially a slowing of tempo in bars 329 and 364, before the descending sequence of bells. In the later performance such fluctuations are avoided, as in audio example no. 24 (2015), the character created through the relentless and persistent alternation of Scriabin's musical 'blocks'.

Both Stravinsky's and Scriabin's dances end with a breakdown of the dance, followed by a momentary silence, before a final gesture. In Stravinsky's case, the dance breaks down through a crescendo and building of orchestral forces, the silence is then followed by a final rising gesture and fortissimo chord. Whilst following a similar pattern, with an intervening silence, Scriabin's dance breaks down by 'dissolving', achieved through an acceleration of tempo and a diminuendo – bars 375-378. After the following silence – bar 379 – the final gesture is slower, suggestive, and the final chord sustained.

In Chapter 3, I explored Smith's notion of Scriabin's harmony in relation to desire and suggested how such a notion has led me to reconsider how I hear Scriabin's harmony. This re-evaluation of Scriabin's harmony as representative of desire – and the desire for something which, ultimately for Scriabin, seems to lie beyond the music, beyond the material – has had a direct influence on the way I play the very last gesture of the Sixth Sonata. I had previously held the conclusion that Scriabin's approach to harmony still retained some of the diatonic principles of tension and resolution, and which led me to interpret harmonies, such as simple dominant 7ths, as 'resolutions' – to some degree I still hold the belief that the use of the rising

semitone may create some sense of tension and release, similar to that of leading note to tonic, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In a similar way, I interpreted the final chord of the Sixth Sonata as a resolution, almost as a final cadence – the bass G at the end being a long awaited resolving of the pedal D found in the opening. My reassessment of Scriabin's harmony as relating to a constant state of desire has changed this interpretation, the closing harmony now understood as 'desiring' further resolution.

The significance of this re-evaluation can be heard in my two recordings of this work, audio examples nos. 29 (2009) and 30 (2015), heard from bar 379 to the end. In the 2009 recording, the notion of a resolving 'cadence' creates different qualities of timing and inflection, compared to the 2015 recording, which to me sounds more open-ended, more suggestive. In the earlier recording (audio example no. 29) there is a far more deliberate slowing down in the final five melody notes, as a result the last chord is far more placed, sounding to me as if the music has slowed down to a complete stop. The increased suggestiveness of the 2015 performance is achieved through the more successful conveyance of a sense of being 'unfinished'. This is achieved through the rising grace note gesture having far more impulse and dynamic inflection, so the music here is still energised – in the 2009 performance this is far slower and less inflected. In addition, the last five rising melodic notes do not slow down as much in the 2015 performance, and the left hand arpeggio figure which accompanies these notes is also played with more impulse and inflection – once again I believe this creates a more energised ending, in which the music doesn't come to a complete rest.

Another reason for the change in interpretation of the final gesture lies in the fundamental 'masculine-feminine' duality that I have come to perceive as being in some way symbolised throughout this work, and I try to capture the contrasting energy

of these elements in the final gesture:



Example 5.76

The right-hand grace-note rising figure is played with more energy, so as to capture the more active character of the Masculine Principle and I have come to understand the trill which follows as a transformative element which connects the faster, grace note figure, with the slower ‘rising’ theme which follows, which I try to convey with the seductive character of the Feminine Principle. As a result, in practice I start the trill faster and louder, and gradually diminuendo and slow down the trill as it progresses, as may be heard in the 2015 performance.

As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the final gesture of the Sixth Sonata is an example of how analysis, research, and practice all play a role in the performance choices I make – and it is the complex, interconnected relationship of these elements of musicianship that I have explored in relation to my own ever-evolving performance and perception of this work. Throughout practice has been used as a way of judging a continually emerging interpretation that has been formed, in part through research and analysis, and in part through practice itself.

Chapter 6

Reflections and Conclusions

In the Introduction I set out the main objectives of this study; these are summarised reflectively below:

- How does an understanding of the historical context of Scriabin's philosophical world relate to a contemporary performance context of his music?
- How has my intuition that analysis and research are beneficial for practice been vindicated?
- What has been the nature of the research process?
- How did I come to understand musical structure in this process?
- Is research always relevant to practice?
- How does my practice-led study relate to a wider context of academic research and artistic performance?

In this final chapter, I return to these questions whilst discussing how I have come to re-evaluate and reflect critically on the relationship between research and practice, particularly in relation to notions of structure, clarity, and characterisation. I will reflect on how this study has led to a greater understanding of how I myself experience and learn music, both as a practitioner and listener. Through consideration of the place of the listener within the act of performance, I will discuss how this study has caused me to reconsider the most effective means of performance presentation for certain repertoire, and I will follow this with a discussion regarding how I currently view my work within the wider context of practice-led research, considering the subjectivity of my own study, as well as the possible ethics of how such investigations are linguistically presented and portrayed.

6.1 The artist as practitioner and researcher – reflections on the processes of practice-led research

This study has led me to significantly reassess my perception of the way analysis and research may be related to practice and has evolved into something far more autoethnographic, in which my own experience of music, and of being an artist, has formed the basis of the interpretative process – my subjective, culturally based experience of being a practitioner and researcher has provided the foundation for interpretative judgment within a wider context of social and cultural conditions and traditions. This may be demonstrated through a title I used in an early draft, which began ‘From Analysis to Performance...’ – a phrase which I have become increasingly critical of due to its hierarchical misrepresentation of the interpretative process which actually takes place. Instead, analysis, research and practice become integrated elements in a wider, interconnected process of ongoing individual interpretation, some key aspects of which are summarised below:

- A new interpretative possibility is discovered through ‘live’ practice, which questions previously held analytical notions.
- Analysis and/or research make conscious an interpretative possibility which had previously been carried out more intuitively, thus enhancing the interpretative position.
- Analysis and/or research lead to a questioning of the current interpretative position in practice.
- The ‘physicality’ of practice provides a crucial dimension of score analysis, in which the practical aspects of practice influence analytical conclusions.

What these points offer is a breakdown of the intricacies I perceive in the relationship between the processes of research, analysis and practice. This process does not constitute a ‘translation’ of one to the other, but rather an interconnected, ongoing

handling in which practice is used as a means of constantly judging analytical thought; practice itself also sometimes acting as the starting point and basis for analysis through a process of repeated ‘analytical listening’. John Freeman offers a similar description:

Practice-based research is that which takes place along a complicated continuum: one which has the types of theoretical, book-based research activities commonly found in universities at one end and practice – which, whilst informed by research, is entered into with performance as its prime outcome – at the other (2010, p. 77).

What is key is the continuous process which occurs in linking practice and research, which is likely to be subjectively different for each practitioner; its ongoing nature making it hard to describe and capture.

The variable, even unpredictable, nature of this process seems to me a likely reason for the lack of consideration given to practice and performance in the more ‘musicological’ analyses of the likes of Berry and Narmour. Whilst I can understand the reasons behind wanting to narrow down the range of interpretative possibilities – and I have used analysis in some cases to this effect – to suggest that, through analysis, one can uncover some sort of fundamental, even ‘objective’ truth about a work seems to go very much against the plurality that makes the art of performance so exciting. In the same way, I would argue that, when practice is given consideration, a similar plurality is potential in the processes and outcomes of analysis – any ‘objective’ conclusion is inevitably based on theory, produced partly for that end, whereas the consideration of the range of ways the music may *sound* in practice, leads to a far more realistic, and multitudinous range of possible analyses. Where the difficulty then lies is in committing to any one analytical, or interpretative view, which must be done with the acknowledgment that this view ‘rests on sand’ and may change at any time. In this respect, I have noticed throughout this study that each time I return to the Sixth Sonata small interpretative shifts have taken place, due to my ongoing

enquiry; this is an inevitable part of the process, and one that should not be avoided, simply acknowledged.

Whilst my presentiment that research and analysis are beneficial to performative interpretation is vindicated, I would also argue strongly that practice is invaluable and informative to the processes of analysis and research; the symbiotic relationship existing between them, mediated through the practitioner. An example of this process may be drawn from the connection I discern between the second subject area of the Sixth Sonata and the character of the Feminine Principle, through which I have suggested that certain thematic elements have the potential to express similar qualities: the music seductive, dream-like, and ominous in character. The process undergone to ascertain what it is that I *do* in practice to express these qualities, and how I judge this to be successful, was not through ‘translation’, but through experimentation in practice, trying out various ways of creating the musical effect of seduction, allure and danger, based on the qualities that I perceived as being potentially in common between the music and the character of the Feminine Principle. It is through a self-reflective analytical process of performance analysis that I was then able to judge whether what I was doing in practice achieved the desired musical effect, and if this research-based interpretation was judged as validated through practice.

The symbiotic relationship between research, practice and analysis may be further demonstrated through an example I have mentioned several times, in which I first came upon the notion that the section from bars 82-91 of the Sixth Sonata could be performed as a dialogue between the masculine and feminine elements, similar to the dialogue found in the *Prefatory Act*. I came upon this interpretation in the spontaneous act of performance, but am certain that I would not have had this moment of inspiration had I not been immersed in research into the work in question, and in

particular with regard to masculine-feminine duality and identity, as portrayed in the *Prefatory Act* libretto. In this respect, research has been present throughout as a constant, potential, source of inspiration and imagination; even though it may not always be immediately clear how certain pieces of information are related to practice, they can provide mental stimulation in the form of images, emotions, descriptive notions and characteristics, mood and atmosphere. Edwards suggests in a similar vein that '[t]he creative process is a matter of being lost one minute and suddenly finding yourself' (2008), implying that the creative process is not a fully conscious experience, perhaps guided at times by intuition, a notion earlier expounded by Marcel Duchamp:

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realisation through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realisation is a series of efforts, pains, satisfaction, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious ... The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realisation, a difference which the artist is not aware of. (1957).

The 'struggle' Duchamp refers to could be understood in relation to the process of trial and error, and experimentation, which occurs in practice, a method which I employed at times in order to find what I judged the most effective means of expression at any given point in the music.

Whilst I agree with Edwards' suggestion that practitioners are at times led by intuition, I disagree with Duchamp with regard to the suggestion that in this process I am not able to be fully aware of *why* such, possibly intuitive judgements are made and justified. I have endeavoured to show in this study the reasoning and understanding behind my artistic decisions and judgment. For instance, I currently understand the second subject area of the Sixth Sonata as expressing musically the same characteristics of the Feminine Principle, and I do so through an understanding of the cultural context surrounding and preceding the work, in which certain musical patterns had been previously connected to similar notions of character. I try to express these qualities in musical terms by finding what I deem to be similarities between narrative

character and musical sound, such as intimacy and persistence; I judge the music, and my performance, to have these potential inherent qualities within my own cultural knowledge and experience.

This heuristic process, in which the success of a performance interpretation is judged, has at times led me to discard or abandon a particular line of investigation, finding that some areas of enquiry were revealed as being less relevant to practice than others. One such instance was my decision to leave out a section relating to Scriabin's possible use of the three octatonic collections in the Sixth Sonata, an analysis which had initially been very interesting and promising; however, in practice I simply could not find a way in which it had any effect on the way I heard the music from a performance perspective.⁹⁴ Having tried many theories – such as the notion that Scriabin's use of pitches from outside of the octatonic scale may lead to an interpretation in which these notes were heard as quasi-appoggiaturas – in practice, I could not judge this to be a valid assertion, primarily as they didn't *sound* to me like appoggiaturas. In a different study, Scriabin's possible use of octatonic collections may be central, but in this particular practice-led investigation I judged them as not relevant enough. It should be made clear though that this does not discount the possibility that they are relevant to practice, only that *I* was unable to find a way in which they were.

6.2 The influence of practice from 'outside' the Sixth Sonata

The experience-based nature of the work undertaken in this study has at times led to connections being formed, perhaps inevitably, with aspects of practice and research outside of the area of study. Freeman refers to a similar notion, suggesting that:

⁹⁴ See Wai-Ling (1993, 1996) and Perlé (1984).

Whatever thoughts and attitudes exist in the mind of the researcher/maker, however temporary and disconnected they may appear to be, are imbued with the capacity to shift the process of investigation into new fields of thought' (2010, p. 178).

During the period in which this present study has taken place I have continued to perform works by a range of composers, and upon reflection am struck by the interconnectedness present between completely different works, and how the performance of a seemingly unrelated work – as far as Scriabin's late music is concerned – can become a source of inspiration and artistic interpretation.

Two such examples lie in my performances of Brahms' 2nd Piano Concerto and Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 111, and in particular in relation to concepts of performative structure and characterisation. In Chapter 5, I discussed my interpretation of Scriabin's descriptive marking 'more and more impulsively, with enchantment', commenting on how I have come to perceive this as referring to an 'ecstatic' rather than an 'excited' character. The consideration of the difference between these two adjectives stemmed from my period of study with the pianist Martin Roscoe, during which he had suggested that the character of the third variation of the 2nd movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 111 was 'ecstatic', his criticism of my performance being that in my hands it sounded too 'excited'. The subtle but significant difference between these two descriptions stayed with me, and especially the contrast in practice between my 'excited' version and Roscoe's 'ecstatic' performance, the distinction lying in the different sort of energy that each word suggests: 'excited' evokes an energised, forward moving energy, whereas 'ecstatic' perhaps alludes to a more expansive *feeling*, rather than *activity*. What is of interest here is that this clearly indicates that the music inherently holds more than one potential character, and it is through practice that we judge which is most appropriate and desirable.

I encountered a similar example in my preparation of Brahms' 2nd Piano

Concerto. The scale of this work is huge, at almost an hour in duration, and I had always hoped to give the impression of this scale through my performance, especially of the first movement which is just shy of around twenty minutes in length. Having listened to various recordings, I became critical of those performances which I judged as employing rubato to the detriment of the effectiveness of the vastness of the composition. The impression I formed was that the scale of the work, for some interpreters, seemed to justify the use of extremely exaggerated rubato, one such example is heard in Daniel Barenboim's live performance of the opening piano cadenza (Brahms Piano Concertos 1 and 2, 2014) in which rubato is taken at almost every opportunity. I judge this to be at odds with the scale of the movement, and causes what is essentially just an extended dominant introduction to be continually stopped and started, rather than creating a sense of sustained intensity.

Whilst this work is worlds apart from Scriabin's Sixth sonata, what I have learned from the experience is what I perceive as the damaging effect certain types of exaggeration may have on the effectiveness of my desired performance interpretation of Brahms' cadenza. It is quite possible that Barenboim has a different interpretation, which is equally valid, but my judgment of this approach is that it is not in keeping with my own perception of the work. In relation to Scriabin's Sonata No. 6, this has nurtured my appreciation of how character and musical effect may be created through, at times, doing very little. The sustaining of a single mood, or gradually changing mood, has also come from my notion of the characteristics of circular transformation, as discussed in Chapter 4; it was through connecting these two concepts that I have formed aspects of my current performance interpretation of the Sixth Sonata, particularly with regard to the avoidance of unwritten exaggeration of tempo and dynamic.

In addition to my own artistic and musical experiences as a student, my performance interpretation has also evolved within the context of my awareness of the artistic practice of other pianists performing Scriabin, both in live performance and on record. The role that these performance and recordings have played is to provide a document against which to judge my own performance interpretation, as well as opening my ears to a range of very different performative choices, such as decisions regarding tempo and rubato, as well as more practical matters relating to the physical aspect of performance practice, such as the various ways large chords may be spread. Whilst I have not actively sought to copy any particular interpretation, the two recordings which have been most influential for my own performance practice are those by Vladimir Sofronitsky and Hakon Austbo – the latter having worked with me on the Sixth Sonata in preparation for my 2015 recording.

Sofronitsky was married to Scriabin's daughter and knew Scriabin and his playing well; it is not hard to imagine when listening to his recordings that his playing may well have been similar to Scriabin's, and what it has revealed to me is the amount of rubato and rhythmic freedom which can be employed as a means of expressing the music's suggestive nature – Sofronitsky frequently taking great liberties regarding unmarked changes of tempo and dynamic. Despite my criticism of this in my earlier 2009 performance, I have increasingly adopted a freer approach within my own sense of phrasing; this does not alter the underlying tempo, but does use tempo manipulation and greater rhythmic freedom and inflection to enhance the shape of phrases. Austbo's recording displays a similar rhythmic freedom and vitality, but what struck me most when working with him was his trust in Scriabin's score markings – such as maintaining dynamic and tempo as written – as well as a greater appreciation and reverence for the subtleties of Scriabin's harmony, such as the way in which a

sense of melodic tension and release is maintained in the interval of the rising semitone – aspects of practice which I have discussed at length throughout this study.

6.3 Structural clarity?

During my early contact with the Sixth Sonata in practice, I was initially extremely focused on the notion of showing, or ‘bringing out’, the sonata-form structure, believing this to be what an audience would be most likely to grasp and recognise. I have previously discussed how this preoccupation may have led to ‘over characterisation’ and exaggeration, as well as a fixation on pianistic clarity, which may be manifest in my 2009 recording of this work. In retrospect I would suggest that I possessed a somewhat naïve notion of the subtleties of what may constitute artistic ‘clarity’, as well as how this related to my judgement and understanding of an effective performance interpretation. As a result of carrying out the preceding study, I now perceive that something can be clear through being unclear; ambiguity and suggestiveness are in themselves forms of clarity: as a performing artist, I understand part of my role as interpreting the nature of the musical materials so as to convey this in performance. It so happens that sometimes the musical materials themselves may be interpreted as being ambiguous – and conveying this ambiguity without imposing externally driven expressive parameters in performance actually ‘clarifies’ its essence. My increasing emphasis on character, mood and emotion as a way of understanding and perceiving change within a temporal structure, as well as a means of connecting musical phenomena to aspects of human experience, has contributed to this redefinition of clarity. I have also been critical of my tendency to employ unwritten increases of tempo and dynamic, as an attempt to unify a section as a whole, now advocating that the sustaining of a particular tempo, dynamic, sound and mood, may

be a far more effective way of creating such an impression.

The development of my notion of the *experience* of structure as best understood as being constructed out of changing moods, characters and emotions has partly evolved out of a reassessment of how I, and perhaps others, listen to and receive music. I have come to realise that, even though I am an experienced musician with a keen analytical ear, when I listen to music my experience is emotional, not analytical.⁹⁵ Furthermore I am far less apprehensive as to whether an audience *hears* the individual details of a structure in the way I do or not; what is most relevant in practice are the decisions that *my* understanding of structure as a performer lead me to make – in relation to such phenomena as dynamic, tempo, inflection, phrasing, and physical gesture – and how these choices may be judged as effectively creating a particular musical effect.

A primary reason for my initial focus on ‘showing’ musical structure was connected with my belief that this would be the most effective means of engaging with potential listeners; I worried that a listener would lose interest in the performance if they did not have a sense of where they were within the work, and so endeavoured to exaggerate the sense of direction already inherent in aspects of the composition. In retrospect, despite the well-meaning intention underlying this interpretative decision, I have come to accept that the complex relationship between artist and audience is such that the performer cannot account for how every audience member experiences and receives the music they present. However, the consideration of a ‘hypothetical’ listener in the process of performance preparation can be useful, cultivating a stronger process of self-critique, in which the practitioner also assumes the role of critical listener.

⁹⁵ It is not surprising that a study, such as the one that Nicholas Cook describes, suggests that – at least within the context of Webern’s *Symphony* – the audience members described the performance afterwards in descriptive terms, such as adjectives, not in terms of structural analysis (2007, pp. 1-9).

6.4 Performance presentation?

The extensive knowledge and resulting interpretation(s) I have acquired of Scriabin's Sonata No. 6 during the process of research leads me to consider how I may most effectively use my ever-expanding erudition beyond this current study, and in particular the desire to share my thoughts with audiences in performance settings. Whilst I accept that there will always remain a degree of autonomy between practitioner and listener, and assumptions should not be made as to how audience members will listen to and receive the music we present, that doesn't mean that practitioners should avoid engaging with their audience in order to try and bridge that gap. In this respect, the lecture-recital has become an increasingly appealing form of performance presentation, in which I am able to verbally communicate some of my interpretative comprehension prior to performance.

Whilst research into the possible benefits of such performance presentation for the listener and performer alike lies beyond the present study, I have always received very positive feedback from audience members regarding this method of communication; a common comment being that my verbal explanations – accompanied sometimes by short musical excerpts – helped them to better make sense of the music. Introducing Scriabin's music in this way presents a unique issue: how to discuss the 'darker' aspects of Scriabin's philosophy in a contemporary context, which isn't detrimental to the music, due to the audience becoming uncomfortable? I am yet to find a satisfactory solution to this complication, and certainly don't want the knowledge I have to be unnerving to the listener, or cause them to be less receptive to the music.

The issue here is also perhaps one of audience expectation, and particularly with regard to notions of tonal closure; Scriabin's harmonic world is born out of

nineteenth century presentiments of dominant function as a device for portraying musical desire, but takes this concept far beyond, in which tonal closure is never achieved. In this respect I have found it useful to discuss the way in which it may be best to perceive and hear Scriabin's harmonic sound world, within the context of continued, unresolved, harmonic desire. The reason for such clarification being that I fear the expectation of resolution, created by prolific musical patterns such as the perfect cadence, seems to be so deeply rooted in Western musical culture, that it seems to me that works which do not utilise these patterns in more conventional ways – either through the creation of a completely new system, or, in Scriabin's case, through the manipulation of such harmonic expectation to create a particular effect – may cause confusion and misunderstanding amongst audience members not familiar with such alternative approaches to harmony.

The form of the lecture is inevitably limited in terms of how much can be conveyed in a short introduction, as well as the capacity of the listener to retain certain information through the performance, and the possibility that too much information could in fact be more distracting than helpful. In a similar way, it is necessary that the form and language with which ideas are communicated be far more informal than the mode of presentation employed in the present study, more complex notions may be omitted and details of things such as the *Prefatory Act* text must be far more broadly summarised, a process which in itself presents unique communicative challenges.

In this regard, future research may include the exploration of other modes of performance presentation. Although the particular research I present in this thesis does not address how a performance of the Sixth Sonata may be staged so as to elicit the kind of authentic experience Scriabin believed his music capable of, future research could examine how aspects of Scriabin's vision for the performance of the

Prefatory Act may be applied to a performance of the Sixth Sonata – or any late work for that matter – such as the inclusion of colour projection, scent, and dance.⁹⁶ Research of this nature may also consider the impact the inclusion of these elements into a performance may have on audience perception, and whether such multimedia presentation may be employed as a performance aid, deepening and enhancing the expressiveness of the music, and the resulting musical experience.

A further interesting consideration regarding my research into the complex nature of Scriabin's philosophy and its influence in the formation of performative interpretation lies in the impact this research may have on the psychology of the performing act. Scriabin said of his music that it requires the performer to 'conjure' at the piano and I would argue that in order to effectively convey his late music in performance, it is necessary to have some sense of the mysticism which lies behind the composition – performing the Sixth Sonata is an incredibly intense experience and one in which I really 'live' every moment of the work, particularly in relation to the idea of dialogue between different characters. Whilst I do not believe in the ideas that Scriabin puts forward in the *Prefatory Act*, I do embrace them in the moment of performance – Scriabin never performed the Sixth Sonata in public, supposedly due to his being afraid of what he had created, and when playing excerpts of the work for friends, would make faces as if frightened by the musical content. The impression that one gets is that Scriabin really 'lived' his music in performance, which is in line with Ivanov's suggestion:

... he [Scriabin] wanted the entire man within him to become wholly an artist, without remainder. For to be an artist meant for him only one thing: to be both the bringer of sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. (1915, p. 224).

Whilst I do not go this far, I certainly play with more intense gestures than in contrasting

⁹⁶ Scriabin's music has already been set to dance, most notably the composer Alexander Nemtin orchestrated a number of Scriabin's late miniatures into a ballet score entitled *Nuances*.

works, frequently getting over the piano more, and moving with slower, more protracted movements, particularly in the more sustained sections. In this respect, an interesting future research project would be to explore the performer's state of mind in the moment of performance; in particular with regard to the more terrifying sounds which make up part of Scriabin's musical sound world.

6.5 The presentation of subjectivity: fostering openness in practice-led research

As someone who – to begin with at least – regarded themselves primarily as a practitioner, an unanticipated aspect of undertaking a study such as this, and which was only consciously fully realised retrospectively, is the sense of intimidation I experienced, particularly when reading and exploring some of the literature surrounding the area of study. This stemmed in part from the use of language in some books and articles, particularly those which focused more on 'dry' analysis; the authoritative tone that I encountered in certain analyses caused me to consider at first that my own perceptions of Scriabin's harmonic world were incorrect, or less-well founded and justified; the linguistic presentation of subjective analytical interpretation as objective fact was at first misleading and unnerving.

Freeman observes that 'writing "one is left to question" rather than "I questioned" will often amount to no more than a stylistic sanctioning of the idea of distance' (2010, p. 184), however I would still question the effect such a choice may have on those practitioners not so familiar with such a sense of academic style. For instance, the use of the pronoun 'we' in conjunction with an argument presented as fact creates a sense that such views are universally shared. Such a use of language may simply be an inevitable part of written academic scholarly presentation, perhaps partly existing in order to strengthen the impression of a convincing argument, however I would now

argue that such an approach may be potentially damaging to the nurturing of openness in research and practice, and contrary to the fundamentally subjective and fluid nature of artistic practice.

I have acknowledged throughout this study that my position is subjective although backed up by evidence gathered through my research into the *Prefatory Act*, and the biographical/historical context of the Sixth Sonata; the resulting performance interpretation, as made manifest in practice, is based on my own changeable and evolving artistic experience, the consequence of which is that my current position is constantly subject to questioning and change. It is in this oscillation between the subjective and more general facts and evidence that practice-led enquire exists, this does not compromise the rigour with which such research is carried out, judged and questioned, as Jeremy Cox writes:

Artistic research must be rigorous, but it cannot be simultaneously objective and artistically engaged. [What is] required [is] a fundamental re-appraisal of the role and legitimacy of the interposed sensibilities of the researcher – one which perceives them as validating the research, rather than compromising it (2009, p.10).

Such a perception of artistic research and practice provides a stimulating, more open environment for musicians, where there is no absolute theory of analysis or harmony, simply different ways of suggesting, justifying and judging different interpretative ideas; creating a more inclusive research environment in which practice and practitioners play a far more central role, as Gergen writes:

Again, in moving towards performance the investigator avoids the mystifying claims of truth and simultaneously expands the range of communities in which the work can stimulate dialogue. (Gergen and Gergen, 2003, 582-583).

In this respect it seems to me to be extremely positive for more and more practitioners to be undertaking research and analysis, as a means of reflecting on their own interpretative processes. This takes many forms – such as those discussed in Chapter 1 – but of particular pertinence to myself is the emergence of the Practice-led

Doctorate. Such work is tremendously exciting and has the potential to produce limitless new thoughts and interpretations of existing works, creating a far more open approach to the many interpretations that a single work can receive. The inevitable subjectivity of such work is an attribute which may be immensely stimulating to others both within and outside of the realm of practice, providing more and more varied interpretations against which to judge, question and validate our own work. Marco De Marinis wrote that '[t]he document ... is the result, above all, of an assemblage, whether conscious or unconscious, of the history, the time and the society which have produced it' (1985, p. 383), in this respect the emergence in recent years of more and more documents of practice-led and practice-based research, as well as research which is rooted firmly in individual artistic experience, may be viewed as a reflection of our current artistic culture.

As I have stated throughout this study, the interpretative conclusions I have reached are in no way definitive or exhaustive, they simply represent my current interpretative position with regard to Scriabin's Sixth Sonata within a practice and research context. I fully acknowledge that my current understanding may, and almost certainly will change in the coming years, in fact one of the challenges of this investigation has been the process of committing, or fixing, my present performance interpretation to paper, finding that small shifts in interpretative choices occur regularly as a result of contact with the work in practice and analysis. Whilst this constant evolution and emergence of performative and analytical interpretation contrasts greatly with some of the views on analysis discussed in Chapter 1 – such as those of Schenker, Berry and Narmour – in my view this is simply an example of the exciting world of possibilities practice-led enquiries can open up, in which there is no one analytical or performative 'truth', rather an endlessly nuanced process of interpretation

which relates directly to our own emotional and physical experience, and artistic response to the work in question. This also makes sure the work continues to ‘live’ rather than becoming a museum piece, keeping the score ‘open’ and, as Cook writes, ‘keeps us listening to the same music ... because of course, in performance, it *isn’t* the same music’ (2013, p. 238). Similarly, Scott Burnham describes the value of the plurality of subjectively determined artistic interpretation, suggesting that as soon as we attempt to fix the interpretation of a work, in the manner of the notion that some form of artistic truth resides in the score:

the piece is stopped dead in its tracks as a viable artwork that might continue to approach us; it is no longer permitted to meet us half-way, for now it has become definitely situated, rendered a museum of its own meaning, its listeners reduced to curators or collectors...We cannot connect with a work that has been closed off; our only option is to collect such works, to own or to possess them. When we are in the business of connecting with an artwork, however, we assume that the work is open (Burnham, 1999, p.198).

In this respect practice-led research provides a perfect way of engaging with this sentiment, due to the plurality of performative interpretation with which performers engage on a daily basis.

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