

# philharmonia orchestra

## ALEXANDER Scriabin

(1872 – 1915)

### ***Le poème de l'extase, Op. 54 (1905/08)***

Scriabin wrote *Le poème de l'extase* (*The Poem of Ecstasy*), Op. 54 – also described by the composer as his 'Symphony No. 4' – between 1905 and 1908. When he started work on the piece he was living in Geneva, virtually penniless and without a publisher, but his dreams were undimmed. His *Poem*, he declared, would be 'a great joy, an enormous festival'. In 1906, the Imprimerie Centrale in Geneva published a ten-page poem by Scriabin that was intended to be read alongside the music. It ends with a triumphal mystical flourish: 'I am a moment illuminating eternity...am affirmation...I am ecstasy.' Scriabin identified three sections in the work, each of them a reminder of the composer's egocentric nature:

1. His soul in the orgy of love
2. The realization of a fantastic dream
3. The glory of his own art

In the first of the three sections, the human is found striving after the ideal, and the 'Ego' theme gradually emerges and asserts itself. The central section presents three main musical ideas, one associated with the flight of the spirit, a second (for solo violin) with human love, and the third (for solo trumpet) with 'the will to arise' – a will that becomes increasingly insistent as the trumpet theme is repeated almost to the point of obsession. The final section, an Epilogue, is a triumphant apotheosis. To leave conductors in no doubt about his intentions, Scriabin has peppered the score with expressive markings such as 'très parfumé' ('very perfumed'), and 'avec une volupté de plus en plus extatique' ('with a sensual pleasure ever more ecstatic'). The result is a tone-poem of great originality and quite glorious excess.

One of the work's most ardent defenders was the conductor Leopold Stokowski – who later conducted several of Messiaen's works with enormous distinction, notably *L'Ascension* and the *Hymne*. In 1919, Stokowski programmed the *Poem of Ecstasy* with the Philadelphia orchestra and harranged the audience after noticing several of them slipping out of the exits before a performance. Probably recalling this incident, three years later, he wrote that 'it is useless to speak to many people of Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*...as they dismiss this remarkable work with a contemptuous muttering of "decadent" or "immoral". It is one of the most highly organized and complex pieces of orchestral polyphony which exists.'

The enthusiastic advocacy of conductors such as Stokowski (who kept it in his repertoire throughout his career), Albert Coates, Eugene Goossens and, more recently (and perhaps more surprisingly) Pierre Boulez, has ensured the *Poem of Ecstasy* a lasting place in concert halls. This was by no means always the case. In 1908, the critic of the *New York Sun* condemned it, complaining that 'the nerves of the audience were worn and racked as nerves are seldom assailed even in these days.' The *Daily Advertiser* in Boston was equally unimpressed, and was 'reminded of the ecstasy of the too convivial gentleman who thought that the air was filled with green monkeys with crimson eyes and sparkling tails – a kind of ecstasy that is sold in Russia at two roubles a bottle.'

The reaction to Scriabin's music in Britain was usually much more welcoming. A. Eaglefield Hull published a biography in English just a year after Scriabin's death, and other enthusiastic commentators on his music included such leading lights of the time as Rosa Newmarch and M. Montagu-Nathan; the pages of *Musical Times* report regularly on the work's success at the Proms in the 1920s and 30s.

Scriabin's interest in colour music really only bore fruit in his next major orchestral work, *Prometheus*. In that respect he was rather different from Messiaen, for whom colour was a lifelong passion. Equally, Messiaen's religious beliefs were grounded in the teaching of the Catholic church, and he always objected to being called a 'mystic' – one of Scriabin's favourite words to describe himself.

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