



ALEXANDER Scriabin (1872-1915) THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS

Peter Donohoe piano

SOMMCD 262-2

CD 1 [74:34]

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|-------|---|-------|
| 1-4 | Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Op. 6 (1892) | 23:58 |
| 5-6 | Sonata No. 2 in G Sharp Minor, Op. 19, "Sonata-Fantasy" (1892-97) | 12:10 |
| 7-10 | Sonata No. 3 in F Sharp Minor, Op. 23 (1897-98) | 18:40 |
| 11-12 | Sonata No. 4 in F Sharp Major, Op. 30 (1903) | 7:40 |
| 13 | Sonata No. 5, Op. 53 (1907) | 12:05 |

CD 2 [65:51]

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|---|--|-------|
| 1 | Sonata No. 6, Op. 62 (1911) | 13:13 |
| 2 | Sonata No. 7, Op. 64, "White Mass" (1911) | 11:47 |
| 3 | Sonata No. 8, Op. 66 (1912-13) | 13:27 |
| 4 | Sonata No. 9, Op. 68, "Black Mass" (1912-13) | 7:52 |
| 5 | Sonata No. 10, Op. 70 (1913) | 12:59 |
| 6 | Vers La Flamme, Op. 72 (1914) | 6:29 |

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SCRIABIN

THE COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS

Peter Donohoe
piano

TURNER
SIMS Southampton

DDD

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DISC
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SCRIABIN PIANO SONATAS

DISC 1 [74:34]

SONATA NO. 1 in F Minor, Op. 6 (1892) [23:58]

- 1 I. Allegro Con Fuoco 9:13
- 2 II. Crotchet=40 (Lento) 5:01
- 3 III. Presto 3:13
- 4 IV. Funèbre 6:29

SONATA NO. 2 in G Sharp Minor, Op. 19, (1892-97) [12:10]

"Sonata-Fantasy"

- 5 I. Andante 8:13
- 6 II. Presto 3:56

SONATA NO. 3 in F Sharp Minor, Op. 23 (1897-98) [18:40]

- 7 I. Drammatico 6:48
- 8 II. Allegretto 2:24
- 9 III. Andante 4:01
- 10 IV. Presto con fuoco 5:25

SONATA NO. 4 in F Sharp Major, Op. 30 (1903) [7:40]

- 11 I. Andante 2:59
- 12 II. Prestissimo volando 4:40

SONATA NO. 5, Op. 53 (1907)

- 13 Allegro. Impetuoso. Con stravaganza – Languido – Presto con allegrezza 12:05

DISC 2 [65:51]

- 1 SONATA NO. 6, Op. 62 (1911) Modéré 13:13

- 2 SONATA NO. 7, Op. 64, *"White Mass"* (1911) Allegro 11:47

- 3 SONATA NO. 8, Op. 66 (1912-13) Lento – Allegro agitato 13:27

- 4 SONATA NO. 9, Op. 68, *"Black Mass"* (1912-13) Moderato quasi andante 7:52

- 5 SONATA NO. 10, Op. 70 (1913) Moderato – Allegro 12:59

- 6 VERS LA FLAMME, Op. 72 (1914) Allegro moderato 6:29

SCRIABIN PIANO SONATAS

Russia produced three renowned composer-pianists at the end of the nineteenth century and all took very different musical paths. Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) became one of the most famous composers and pianists of his generation and today his music is as popular as ever. His slightly younger friend Nicolai Medtner (1879-1951) struggled to make a career as a composer but was financially supported by the Maharajah of Mysore. His piano works have rarely been popular with the public and are not often taken up by pianists. Rachmaninov's fellow student at the Moscow Conservatory was Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915), a unique figure in Russian music as he seemed to follow a musical path all his own, completely different to that of either of his contemporaries. Of course, there were many other composer pianists of a lesser rank who fell into the same musical category as Rachmaninov and Medtner in writing tonal music well into the twentieth century – Sergei Bortkiewicz (1877-1952) and Gyorgy Catoire (1861-1926) – to name but two although, like Scriabin, Catoire was more composer than pianist.

Scriabin's early works show the influence of Chopin in terms of melody and harmony and even title – Prelude, Impromptu, Waltz, Nocturne, Etude, Mazurka – but later works were given the more fanciful titles of Morceau and Poème. In the early works of the 1880s and 1890s a harmonic and structural model can be discerned, but Scriabin was already experimenting with style

and form from the early piano sonatas. Indeed, the ten piano sonatas give a clear cross section of his developing compositional style.

The First Sonata Op. 6 was published in 1892 when he was twenty. There had been two earlier attempts at writing a piano sonata but this was the first published as such. At the time, apparently trying to emulate classmate and piano virtuoso Josef Lhevinne (1874-1944), Scriabin had damaged his right hand due to over-practicing technically challenging works and this threw him into a state of despondency.

'The first important event in my life: fate is the barrier to reaching the longed-for goals – lustre and fame. The doctors think that the illness cannot be got over. The first failure of my life. The first earnest reflections. The beginning of analysis...most gloomy mood.'

The first sonata then, is a biographical representation of Scriabin at the age of twenty at a time when he thought he would never be able to play the piano again in public. The pervading mood of the work is sombre and dark – so much so, that Scriabin ends it with a funeral march. While the first movement is turbulent and restless, the second movement has an air of resignation. The Presto is already less like Chopin and more like the impassioned César Franck or Scriabin's contemporary, Rachmaninov.

In the Second Sonata (Sonata-Fantasy) Op. 19 the thick Brahmsian textures of the first sonata are replaced by melodies surrounded by filigree

decoration. Two important aspects of Scriabin's style are already evident in this movement – the declamatory, upward surging left-hand octave at the interval of a fifth or fourth, and the generous use of the major sixth chord. The work is a depiction of Scriabin's response to the sea which he first saw at the age of twenty on a visit to Latvia in 1892. At this time he wrote, 'I like the sea so much, and am drawn to it! There is its freedom, quite apart from its infinite colours and shapes.' Further journeys brought him into contact with the sea – to Genoa in 1895 and the Crimea in 1897 – and the work was composed between 1892 and 1897.

'The first part evokes the calm of a night by the seashore in the South; in the development we hear the sombre agitation of the depths. The section in E major represents the tender moonlight which comes after the first dark of night. The second movement, presto, shows the stormy agitation of the vast expanse of the ocean.'

The Second Sonata already shows Scriabin's preference for a slow, mysterious, improvisatory beginning followed by a fantastic, fast movement. Also evident are elements of drama and tension created by heroic imperious surging melodies.

The Third Sonata Op. 23 is a large scale work of four movements written around the time of the first two symphonies but it would be the last to use this conventional form of movements. Begun in 1897, Scriabin completed it in the summer of 1898. It opens with the familiar upward left-hand octave

and is marked *Drammatico*. Some years after publication, Scriabin provided descriptions of the movements under the heading 'States of the Soul'.

- I The soul, free and untamed is thrown into a whirlpool of suffering and struggle
- II The soul finds momentary and illusory respite; tired of suffering it wants to forget, wants to sing and flourish, despite everything. But the light rhythm, the fragrant harmonies are just a veil through which gleams the restless and languishing soul.
- III The soul floats on a sea of feelings, tender and sorrowful: love, sorrow, vague desires, indefinable thoughts, illusions of a delicate dream.
- IV The soul struggles in the uproar of the unfettered elements. From the depth of being rises the fearsome voice of creative man whose victorious song resounds triumphantly. But too weak yet to reach the summit he plunges, defeated, into the abyss of non-being.

Rather than a programme for the work the description probably represents more what the composer was feeling as he wrote it and it can be seen as a *fin de siècle* Russian piano sonata of merit. The theme of the last movement is a descending chromatic line and the listener can detect a greater use of chromaticism in the harmony throughout the movement. At the climax Scriabin introduces the theme of the Andante over the main chromatic theme in the left hand.

With the Fourth Sonata Op. 30 from 1903 we return to the two movement (slow-fast) structure of the Second Sonata but this time Scriabin does not feel the need to add the subtitle Fantasy to describe its unconventional structure. Immediately we hear a shift in the use of harmony with the opening based on major sevenths and augmented chords. It is a development of Wagner's Tristan harmonies with the rising semi-tone to the fore and a copious use of the rising fourth at the opening of both movements. This is the sonata that announces Scriabin's own original style where all the experimental factors of the earlier sonatas come together to create a world of fantasy that had not been heard before in music. Scriabin was no longer depicting the sea or elements of nature but the whole of creation and the cosmos.

‘The work of people should be the creation and life of all nature and of the entire cosmos. The universe must be the expression and the realisation of a unified musical state of being, and if you agree, be the music of life itself.’

As in the Third Sonata, at the climax of the final movement we hear the melody of the preceding slow movement declaimed in joyous ecstasy.

As we reach the half way mark with the Fifth Sonata of 1907 Scriabin settles on single movement structures for this and the remaining works, all lasting between eight and twelve minutes in performance. He worked on it at the same time as he was finishing his Poem of Ecstasy while living in Lausanne. He wrote to a correspondent in December 1907 –

‘The Poem of Ecstasy took much of my strength and taxed my patience. [...] Today I have almost finished my 5th Sonata. It is a big poem for piano and I deem it the best composition I have ever written. I do not know by what miracle I accomplished it [...]

His wife wrote to a friend at the time –

‘I cannot believe my ears. It is incredible! That sonata pours from him like a fountain. Everything you have heard up to now is as nothing. You cannot even tell it is a sonata. Nothing compares to it. He has played it through several times, and all he has to do is to write it down [...]

The work is one of inspired imagination and was written in less than six days. Scriabin introduced the work with a quotation from the preface to his Poem of Ecstasy –

*I call you to life, oh mysterious forces!
Drowned in the obscure depths of the creative spirit,
Timid shadows of life, to you I bring audacity!*

The work has the most extraordinary beginning of any piano sonata. A latent rumbling in the bass of the piano is called to life and springs up the length of the keyboard. As in the Fourth Sonata, a slow beginning then leads into a fantastic Presto; thereafter the work consists of alternating sections of languor and ecstasy. With a stroke of genius, Scriabin uses his

opening dash to end the work abruptly, but as Taneyev has so famously said, the music does not end, it just breaks off.

By 1911, when Scriabin wrote his Sixth Sonata Op. 62, his harmonic tonality had completely broken down and dissipated. He had written *Prometheus - Poem of Fire* Op. 60 the previous year and this sonata inhabits a similar world but with more morbidity than ecstasy. Scriabin obviously thought he had created something altogether otherworldly as he would not play it in public and described it as 'frightening...dark and mysterious, impure, dangerous.' The work has the air of an Edgar Allen Poe nightmare (such as *The Conqueror Worm*) with Scriabin actually labelling certain passages *l'épouvante surgit* (surge of terror). An increasing use of trills at climaxes in the Sonatas begins with this one.

Although a counterpart to the Sixth Sonata and cited as an exorcism of the forces he unleashed in it, the Seventh Sonata Op. 64 was actually written before Op. 62. Its nickname of White Mass was apparently given it by the composer although that does not appear on the manuscript score. His original tempo marking of *Prophétique* was replaced by his publisher Serge Koussevitzky with 'Allegro', no doubt in an attempt to aid the performer as the whole work is sprinkled with challenging instructions – 'with a heavenly voluptuousness', 'with a dark majesty'. By this time in his life, Scriabin wanted to express in music not only the cosmos but a whole rarefied world of 'voluptuous rapture and overwhelming forces' a world suffused with incense, diaphanous images of winged flight, an

ecstatic disorder creating a trance like effect on performer and audience. As the trills increase, echoes of a later work *Vers la Flamme* Op. 72 can be heard, and as the work draws near its conclusion a spread chord over five octaves that represents a flash of blinding light is heard before the music dissolves.

The last three sonatas were all written in 1912-1913. The Eighth Sonata Op. 66 is another two section slow-fast structure but differs from the previous one in that there are few written performance indications except 'tragique'. The harmonic language is slightly less dissonant and although there are the familiar devices such as trills, the lack of a dramatic peroration gives the feeling of resignation rather than struggle.

The Ninth Sonata Op. 68 acquired the title Black Mass which was not given it by the composer. The title stuck as it vividly represents the Satanic air conjured by this work. The opening figure is a descending chromatic scale with tri-tones as the lower line. This, along with a staccato repeated note figure, a falling major third which becomes minor, and Scriabin's favourite 'pleading' rising and falling semi-tone are the major components of the work. He mixes these together with trills, but it is the structure that is unusual and unique. Rather than being in two sections of slow-fast, Scriabin begins at a slow tempo but increases the speed, Allegro – più vivo – Allegro molto – until, by way of a rapid repetition of the opening figure (reminiscent of a passage in Prokofiev's *Suggestion Diabolique*), we arrive at an Alla Marcia, a grotesque and blatant melody supported by the opening figure. A violent più

vivo and presto follows only to descend into the depths with the work then ending as it began.

The Sonata No. 10 Op. 70 is an antidote to the previous work. The opening of falling thirds is marked 'very sweetly and pure' while much of the music moves chromatically. A surprise major ninth under a trill sets off the Allegro section whose theme is a descending chromatic figure moving in semitones. There are fleeting reminiscences of the Fifth sonata and Tristan is still not far away. The structure is that of sonata form and Scriabin's copious use of trills corresponds to his theories on light, colours and the sun. To understand his thought processes at this point in his life would be nigh impossible; he said of the work, 'My Tenth Sonata is a sonata of insects. Insects are born from the sun, they are the kisses of the sun.' A section near the end is marked 'puissant, radieux' and is formed of block tremolos of a unique nature which anticipates *Vers la Flamme* Op. 72 and works by Olivier Messiaen. Scriabin ends with one of his gossamer dances, as light and fast as anything he wrote, but as in the previous sonata, it ends as it began.

Vers la Flamme Op. 72 is one of Scriabin's last works from 1914. The work is a musical representation of temperature increase through use of dynamics, register and harmony. It is a highly effective piece depicting the earth being consumed by the rays of the sun and is basically one long crescendo with a descending semi-tone being its main feature.

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PETER DONOHOE

Peter Donohoe was born in Manchester in 1953. He studied at Chetham's School of Music for seven years, graduated in music at Leeds University, and went on to study at the Royal Northern College of Music with Derek Wyndham and then in Paris with Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod. He is acclaimed as one of the foremost pianists of our time, for his musicianship, stylistic versatility and commanding technique.

In recent seasons Donohoe has appeared with the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Concert Orchestra, the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra, the St Petersburg Philharmonia, RTE National Symphony Orchestra, the Belarusian State Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and CBSO, a UK tour with the Russian State Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as concerts in South America, Europe, Hong Kong, South Korea, Russia, and the USA. Other engagements include performances of all three James MacMillan piano concertos with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, a series of concerts for the Ravel and Rachmaninov Festival at



Bridgewater Hall alongside Noriko Ogawa, and performances with The Orchestra of the Swan. Donohoe is also in high demand as an adjudicator at piano competitions around the world. Donohoe's recent competitions have been the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, Moscow, the Queen Elisabeth Competition, Belgium, and the Hong Kong International Piano Competition.

Recent discs include a recording of Witold Maliszewski's Piano Concerto in B flat minor with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra conducted by Martin Yates (Dutton Vocalion), as well as three discs of Prokofiev piano sonatas for SOMM Records, the third of which was released at the end of April 2016. The first Prokofiev disc was described by *Gramophone* as 'devastatingly effective', declaring Donohoe to be 'in his element', and a review in *Classical Notes* identified Donohoe's 'remarkably sensitive approach to even the most virtuosic of repertoire'. His second Prokofiev disc was given 5 stars by *BBC Music Magazine*, and the third disc was highly praised by *The Times*, *Birmingham Post*, and Jessica Duchon. Other recordings include Cyril Scott's Piano Concerto with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Martin Yates (Dutton Vocalion), and Malcolm Arnold's *Fantasy on a Theme of John Field* with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Martin Yates (also Dutton), for which BBC Music Magazine described him as an 'excellent soloist', and Gramophone stated that it 'compelled from start to finish'.

Donohoe has performed with all the major London orchestras, as well as orchestras from across the world such as Royal Concertgebouw,

Leipzig Gewandhaus, Munich Philharmonic, Swedish Radio, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Vienna Symphony and Czech Philharmonic Orchestras. He has also played with the Berliner Philharmoniker in Sir Simon Rattle's opening concerts as Music Director. He made his twenty-second appearance at the BBC Proms in 2012 and has appeared at many other festivals including six consecutive visits to the Edinburgh Festival, La Roque d'Anthéron in France, and at the Ruhr and Schleswig Holstein Festivals in Germany. In the United States, his appearances have included the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Detroit Symphony Orchestras. Peter Donohoe also performs numerous recitals internationally and continues working with his long standing duo partner Martin Roscoe, as well as more recent collaborations with artists such as Raphael Wallfisch, Elizabeth Watts and Noriko Ogawa.

Donohoe has worked with many of the world's greatest conductors: Christoph Eschenbach, Neeme Jarvi, Lorin Maazel, Kurt Masur, Andrew Davis and Yevgeny Svetlanov. More recently he has appeared as soloist with the next generation of excellent conductors such as Gustavo Dudamel, Robin Ticciati and Daniel Harding.

Peter Donohoe is an honorary doctor of music at seven UK universities, and was awarded a CBE for services to classical music in the 2010 New Year's Honours List.

