

# **Scriabin's 8th sonata as a philosophical case study: Can music express complex, timeless ideas?**

*An Essay by Martin Kaptein*

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In this essay I would like to have a closer look at the *Sonata No.8 Opus 66* of Alexander Scriabin as not only a performing musician and artist but also a concerned philosopher and thinker. The goal of my essay is to closer approach, grasp and understand the meaning of Music as a form of art - from different viewpoints - by having the 8th sonata of Scriabin as a guide and help for this exploration.

From literary information about Scriabin as a composer, and also concretely about his 8th sonata we know with certainty that he exercised great care and diligence when composing, in regard to choices concerning musical motifs, harmonies, structures etc.. The fact that works from his later period of composing (starting around his Opus 30), which his 8th Sonata is part of, are full of symbolic, philosophic and sometimes even spiritual ideas and concepts is very well documented, by himself (through letters), contemporaries and friends<sup>1</sup> (who published books and biographies about him), and researchers analysing his scores and notes. Hence, we can say with certainty that there is something to reflect on, and that the Sonata does indeed present a wide pallet of underlying ideas.

However, the question arises, whether the compositional result, i.e. the 8th sonata being performed during a recital by a pianist, live, would yield the, by the composer desired experience and, ultimately, insight and whether it would be possible to hear and understand the underlining foundational ideas of this sonata in the form of sound by an (informed) audience. There is arguably a difference between analysing a score of a musical piece, with a background knowledge of all known compositional ideas involved, and hearing the same piece as part of an audience and understanding it straight away. Hence, music can serve as a placeholder for ideas, with the employment of symbolic language, but it could only very unlikely evoke directly the same knowledge on a hypothetically culturally uneducated and uninformed listener. This highlights the importance of awareness of cultural, societal and historic contexts, in order to understand the ideas of a piece by a composer to a higher degree. Knowing these contexts allows music, in general terms, to represent *any* meaning, in *any* times or societies.

If we look back on Scriabin's Sonata No.8 many levels of interpretations of its representations are possible. From the point of view of Scriabin (which is accessible to us, and subject to our own layers of cultural interpretation), the 8th sonata could most likely be a philosophical statement of life, in a circular form.

Just inspecting the fact that this Sonata was composed last and carries the Number 8 (not 10 as there were ten sonatas in total), which in many cultures, especially the cultures Scriabin

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<sup>1</sup>L. L. Sabaneyev. *Vospominaniya o Skryabine* (Russian: Леонид Сабанеев, *Воспоминания о Скрябине*) (English: Reminiscences of Scriabin) (1925). Moscow: Klassika XXI, 2014.

himself was interested in<sup>2</sup> carries the meaning of infinity<sup>3</sup>, already foreshadows its philosophical importance. If one were to decipher the chords and harmonies to color from the 8th sonata the same way Scriabin dealt in with the (approximately in the same time composed) Prometheus symphony (Op.60), and read the colors/characters<sup>4</sup>, one would discover the progression from colors associated with humanity to progressively god and heavenly-like, before finally returning back to the same starting position (circular).

At this point it would be tempting to provide a detailed analysis of this sonata, highlighting all the hidden transformations of motifs, meaning and color (Scriabin was a synaesthete) of chords and harmonies, meaning of rhythmical patterns, form and structure of the piece and much more. However, this undertaking would be far out of the scope of this essay. Important to reiterate at this point would be the definite importance of all compositional techniques used by Scriabin to support an idea which is, in a sense, bigger than this sonata itself, as it tries to formulate a philosophical statement, which, in contrast to this sonata, is timeless (while the sonata takes a *limited* amount of time to perform).

This brings me to the idea, whether Music, which is an art taking place entirely in time (usually in a limited amount of it), can convey concepts which are outside of the concept of time - timeless. After having had a closer look at this sonata, I can say with high certainty that this is indeed possible, and is in fact not in conflict with the time-bound nature of music: There are always different levels to a musical piece. Such can be the piece itself, as performed by a performer on stage, who is much less occupied by the philosophical ('abstract') ideas of the piece, and much more with 'practical' (piano-performance related) work, such as phrasing, memorization, rhythm, whilst all of it combining (after practising the sonata for a presumably long amount of time) in a more-or-less subconscious way. Then there is, like the reader of a book, slowly digesting the underlying meaning, the audience, listening to the interpretation of a pianist (which can be highly subjective by the way), adding more layers to the piece. Like I stated before, the cultural awareness and its general context of said audience is of great relevancy.

This leads me to the final question - can music, if one were to define it as sound waves, convey express complex ideas at all? As we have seen, the express motivation of Scriabin in his 8th sonata was to (attempt to) express higher spiritual ideas. So the logical question arises, whether it is (or is not) possible at all.

Due my aforementioned arguments, the analysis of different layers of interpretation of the Sonata No.8, the importance of cultural contexts, understanding Scriabin's own way of thinking and composing, the answer to previous question cannot be given clearly. Music **can** express complex ideas and philosophies, but not entirely on its own: It depends on a audience, who is aware of the cultural contexts of said piece. Whilst an argument could be made for music being able to

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<sup>2</sup>L. L. Sabaneyev. *Vospominaniya o Skryabine* (Russian: Леонид Сабанеев, *Воспоминания о Скрябине*) (English: Reminiscences of Scriabin) (1925). Moscow: Klassika XXI, 2014.

<sup>3</sup>H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*. Vol. II, *Cosmogogenesis*. London, The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888, heading to p. 607.

<sup>4</sup>A.Scriabin, *Prometheus Op.60*, preface, publisher: Russischer Musikverlag GMBH Berlin - Moskau

convey 'general' and 'universal' feelings and emotions and concepts<sup>5</sup>, most likely the bulk of the interpretational work is carried by contexts surrounding the composer, audiences etc.. It could be very well true, that for a person from an entirely different cultural background, without access to mentioned contexts, the 8th sonata of Scriabin might just very well be a random collection of notes and noises. But then, this could in the same way be said about any piece of music, or perhaps even form of art.

Whether 'universal' music could exist at all is, hence, still a question. However, isn't music a humanistic form of art, isn't it subjective and personal by definition, thus depending on all of the layers and contexts outlined by me in this essay? As this question can be endlessly debated, it clearly goes out of the score of this essay. I have presented different viewpoints, different approaches of philosophical analyses. But does all of this matter in the end? Personally, the 8th sonata of Scriabin is still a magical work for me, perhaps just because of the sheer possibilities to 'experience' it.

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<sup>5</sup>R.Scruten, The Ring of Truth