

ALEXANDER Scriabin  
(1872-1915)

GARRICK ÖHLSSON, PIANO

1) Étude in C sharp minor, Op. 2, No. 1 (3:17)

**Twelve Études, Op. 8 (29:53)**

2) Étude in C sharp major, Op. 8, No. 1 (1:29)

3) Étude in F sharp minor, Op. 8, No. 2 (1:41)

4) Étude in B minor, Op. 8, No. 3 (1:59)

5) Étude in B major, Op. 8, No. 4 (2:02)

6) Étude in E major, Op. 8, No. 5 (2:26)

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**Eight Études, Op. 42 (14:23)**

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15) Étude in F sharp minor, Op. 42, No. 2 (:59)

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# SCRIABIN

## The Complete Études

The creative career of Alexander Nikolayevitch Scriabin (1872-1915) described a brilliant but tragic trajectory. He began as a pianistic prodigy in an elaborated Chopinesque style, as exemplified by his early Piano Concerto, sonatas and études. But his development was prodigious, and by the turn of the century he was capitalizing with truly Russian fervour on the influence of Wagner – and the imaginative stimulus of the grandiose esoteric beliefs he was developing from Nietzsche and Theosophy – to create a personal language heady and erotically voluptuous in its chromatic freedom, extravagant and flamboyant in its gestures. This rapid and radical development, which placed Scriabin in the forefront of the modernist masters of his time, took place within little more than a decade (say from 1898-1911) and reached its apotheosis in the orchestral *Poem of Ecstasy* and *Prometheus* and the heaven-storming Fifth, aloofly hermetic Sixth, and triumphant Seventh (*White Mass*) Piano Sonatas. These latter works already show the trend towards extreme concision, and allusive but logical development out of germinal motifs and chordal structures, which Scriabin continued to explore and refine in the ever more inward, mysti-

cally self-communing piano works of his last years. He was only 43 when he died, but though his late music points to many possibilities that were to be taken up by later composers, his output of works is so idiosyncratic, self-contained and self-consistent that it does not seem incomplete. It is a unified phenomenon.

Apart from his sonatas Scriabin devoted himself primarily to the same lyric, miniature forms that Chopin had established and practised: nocturnes, preludes, impromptus, mazurkas, études. But through his swift stylistic development he transformed these genres into something rich and strange – a process that can be traced, for example, in his complete études. The great étude cycles, from Chopin through Liszt to Debussy and Ligeti, always exhibit a two-fold aspect: on the one hand the exploration and mastery of specific technical issues, and on the other the making of enthralling, poetic music out of that process of exploration. Scriabin's études, of which he composed 26 in all, display this characteristic duality.

His earliest idiom can be described as a kind of amalgam of Chopin, Liszt and Tchaikovsky: if Chopin's pianistic style is the basis of Scriabin's own, the influence of Tchaikovsky gives it a Russian tinge in melody and harmony, while Lisztian bravura carries the Chopinesque filigree into wilder realms of virtuosity. Scriabin's very first **Étude in C sharp minor, Op. 2 No. 1**, the first of his *Trois Morceaux* of 1886 or 1887, shows this highly

derivative amalgam while already being a very effective piece. Composed when Scriabin was only 15, it is essentially a study in tonal balance, *cantabile* voicing of chords, and pedalling. It displays his precocious gifts in terms of pianistic and formal perfection while referring to a Chopin model (probably the latter's Étude Op. 10 No. 3) and establishing a lugubrious, Tchaikovskian mood through its long-breathed melodies.

Only a few years later, with the heroic set of 12 **Études, Op. 8** completed in 1894, Scriabin had entered into his first maturity. He worked hard on these pieces, constantly revising some of them before publication, and included some of them in his debut recital in St. Petersburg in 1895. The model here is surely Chopin's two sets of twelve Études each, Opp. 10 and 25, but the rhythmic complexity and increased chromaticism of the harmony show Scriabin speaking in a supercharged and often turbulent version of that lyric idiom, and with his personal voice.

The first of the set, **No. 1 in C sharp major**, is characterized by a butterfly flight of triplets played first by the right hand, then by the left, and finally by both, and a constant rhythmic play of two against three. The second étude, **No. 2 in F sharp minor**, takes rhythmic complexities further as the pianist is required to play five-note sequences with the right hand against three-note sequences in the left. A rhapsodic, 'oriental' vein is apparent in the moody arabesques, but the piece subsides to a reasonably peaceful

close. **No. 3 in B minor**, in a swirling 6/8 time, is marked *Tempestoso*, and justifies the epithet by its angular melodic writing against streams of alternating single notes and octaves, and violent left-hand cross-rhythms. The undulating arpeggios of the delicately fragranced **No. 4 in B major** are more serene, but again Scriabin makes play with cross-rhythms of five against three.

**No. 5 in E major**, marked *Brioso*, is a sprightly octave study that after an initial dance-like section turns more serious and passionate; the opening music is reprised in elaborated form, in triplets rather than the original duplets. **No. 6 in A major** a contrasting study in elegant legato sixths, rather pastoral in feeling despite its waltz measure. **Étude No. 7 in B flat minor**, marked *presto, tenebroso, agitato*, opens with a sinister riding motion and develops a dark-hued chromatic melody in its central section; the ride becomes positively spectral in the closing bars. Although in most performances the longest, the beautiful **No. 8 in A flat major** is technically the simplest of these études: Scriabin wrote it for his pupil and first love, Natalya Sekerina, and it is a kind of love-song in the guise of an 'album-leaf'.

The last four Études of Op. 8 are also the most ambitious: more imposing in size, and dramatically raising the stakes in the requirements of bravura technique. **No. 9 in G sharp minor** is marked 'alla ballata' and makes

clear reference to the *Ballades* of Chopin. Technically it is another octave study, but its rapid, toccata-like writing immediately establishes a mood of passionate struggle. It rises to a climax only to swiftly subside to broader melodic writing, but the quieter ending suggests exhaustion rather than the achievement of tranquillity. The pulsating **Étude No. 10 in D flat major** is one of Scriabin's fluttering, fugitive evocations of flight, achieved through the combination of a chromatic kaleidoscope staccato thirds in the right hand against wide-ranging patterns in the left, sometimes involving cross-rhythms of five against six. **No. 11 in B flat minor** seems like a more mature revisitation of Op. 2 No. 1: it has a melancholy, post-Tchaikovskian atmosphere, its drooping falling sequences redolent of Russian folksong. It provides a necessary moment of repose, albeit a lyrically sorrowful one, before this marvellous étude-sequence ends with the magnificent **No. 12 in D sharp minor**, perhaps Scriabin's most famous piano piece. Marked *patetico*, this is sometimes called his 'Revolutionary' étude and is clearly his answer to Chopin's Op. 10 No. 12: a final octave study thrumming with internal excitement both defiant and sorrowing in its outward gestures and the fusillade of repeated chords in which it climaxes.

Almost ten years elapsed before Scriabin composed his next set of études, the **Eight Études, Op. 42**, which date from 1903. By this time he was an established composer with two symphonies and a piano concerto to his

name, but also in the toils of a love-affair with his pupil Tatyana Schloezer which would soon lead to separation from his wife Vera, and increasingly involved in theosophy and esoteric speculation which was leading him to an apocalyptic world-view in which the artist would be the saviour of mankind. Something of these hectic, mystically passionate tendencies is conveyed by the Op. 42 Études, which though nominally still in specific keys, include some numbers so imbued by extreme chromaticism and rhythmic intricacy that they take tonality towards its outer limits. Contemporary with his Fourth Piano Sonata and *Satanic Poem*, they are essentially prophetic compositions, with pre-echoes of Scriabin's Third and Fourth Symphonies (*The Divine Poem* and *The Poem of Ecstasy*) and his Piano Sonatas Nos. 5-6. Other members of the sequence, however, are unexpectedly traditional in their tonal approach.

The set begins with **Étude No. 1 in D flat major**, a study in flickering, firefly velocity, insubstantial and weightless in its tonal direction, with complex cross rhythms of nine against five. It seems to start *in medias res*, a cross-section through an ineluctable process of growth. **No. 2 in F sharp minor** is more melodically direct, but the tune is undermined by the snake-like coils of the left-hand accompaniment, disturbingly shifted across the beats. It is brief, almost apothegmatic, and indeed the études of the Op. 42 set are on average shorter than those of Op. 8 as Scriabin tended towards greater and greater compression of his ideas. Paradoxically

the piece's brevity seems to increase its intensity as moments of felling or vision. **Étude No. 3 in F sharp major** is an eldritch exercise in shivery chromatic gossamer, its rapid figurations briefly shining forth and then gone: in Russia this number is sometimes called, not inappropriately, 'the mosquito'. **Étude No. 4** remains with the nominal F sharp major but is much warmer in its nostalgic remembrance of romantic melody – a really beautiful, quietly ecstatic piece in Scriabin's dreamiest nocturnal vein.

**Étude No. 5 in C sharp minor** is a much more turbulent outburst, working up a fine romantic passion with its hurrying accompanimental patterns. Its sense of abandonment and unstoppable forward drive rises to a magnificent climax: this is the giant of the set, a piece which shows Scriabin as essentially and passionately Russian as his contemporaries Medtner and Rachmaninov. The swirling cross-rhythms of **No. 6 in D flat major** are ceaselessly active yet mysteriously confident: the piece carries the designation *Esaltato* (exalted). The brief **No. 7 in F minor** is a kind of round-dance in a similar vein to many pieces of Medtner. The concluding étude, **No. 8 in E flat major**, contrasts a rippling, capricious outer section with a snatch of brooding chorale-like melody at its centre. The piece trips off almost casually, insubstantial, scorning to make any great peroration.

Scriabin's next two études are very brief, mere shards from his rapidly-

developing stylistic vocabulary. Significantly, they are no longer designated by key-signature. **Op. 49 No. 1** is the first of a set of 3 *Pieces* composed in 1905: its restless gait, like a tethered bird attempting to fly, is played off against a tritonal bass. **Op. 56 No. 4** is the last of a group of 4 *Pieces* from 1907: here we have a whirling dervish dance in phosphorescent triplets, harmonically open-ended. These strange little pieces are but pale foreshadowings of Scriabin's final set of études, the **Three Études, Op. 65** composed in 1911-12. By this stage of his development the composer was combining an ever freer fantasy with ever sparer gestures and an increasingly systematic use of 'mystic' harmonies, and spiritual exaltation is interwoven ever more closely with music of exhaustion and disillusion: a profoundly moving and ambiguous final testament. Op. 65 is characterized by fierce octaves, clanging chords, chromatic ambiguity, and strange counter rhythms. The Op. 65 Études depend on a sense of cadence or finality even less than Op. 42.

The three movements systematically exploit three intervals in the right hand, respectively ninths, sevenths and fifths. Scriabin himself never played **Étude Op. 65, No. 1**, not so much because of its immense difficulty as because his relatively small hands could not encompass its rapid *pianissimo* chromatic scales of major ninths. This is one of the most ghostly pieces in his output, haunted by insubstantial phantoms and arriving at a still central point of almost weightless ecstasy before the restless

spirits speak again in the fretful ninths. **No. 2** is more nostalgic: despite its dissonant major-seventh harmony it alternates a rocking cradle-song with bird-like flutterings that rise hopefully. Finally **No. 3**, in fifths and octaves, is a brittle, quicksilver ethereal dance interrupted by imperious pronouncements, sounding out as if on trombones and trumpets. It is a quintessential Scriabinesque vision of life as a nexus of beauty and apocalypse, the dance finally breaking free of the earth and scampering off into empyrean freedom.

*Notes by Malcolm MacDonald*

Since his triumph as winner of the 1970 Chopin International Piano Competition, pianist **Garrick Ohlsson** has established himself worldwide as a musician of magisterial interpretive and technical prowess. Although he has long been regarded as one of the world's leading Chopin exponents, Mr. Ohlsson commands an enormous repertoire, which ranges over the entire piano literature. A student of the late Claudio Arrau, Mr. Ohlsson has come to be noted for his masterly performances of the works of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, as well as the Romantic repertoire. His concerto repertoire alone is unusually wide and eclectic – ranging from Haydn and Mozart to works of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and to date he has at his command some

80 concertos, which he regularly performs with the world's leading orchestras. A musician of commanding versatility, Mr. Ohlsson is also a consummate chamber pianist. He has collaborated with many of the leading chamber groups of our time, including the Cleveland, Emerson, Takács and Tokyo String Quartets, and with violinist Jorja Fleezanis and cellist Michael Grebanier, he is a founding member of the San Francisco - based FOG Trio.

A prolific recording artist, Mr. Ohlsson can be heard on the RCA Victor Red Seal, Angel, Bridge, BMG, Delos, Hänssler, Nonesuch, Telarc, and Virgin Classics labels. For Bridge Records, he has recorded the following: Bach *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988; Handel: Suite No. 2, HWV 427; (BRIDGE 9193); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 1: Op. 7, Op. 78, Op. 101; (BRIDGE 9198); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 2: Op. 2, No. 2, Op. 81, Op. 111; (BRIDGE 9201); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 3: Op. 2, No. 3, Op. 14, No. 1, Op. 14, No. 2, Op. 79; (BRIDGE 9207); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 4: Op. 26, Op. 28, Op. 90; (BRIDGE 9249); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 5: Op. 13, Op. 27, No. 2, Op. 53; (BRIDGE 9250); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 6: Op. 106, Op. 31, No. 1, (BRIDGE 9262); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 7: Op. 22, Op. 37, No. 1, Op. 110; (BRIDGE 9265); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 8: Op. 2, No. 1; Op. 57; No.1; Op. 109; (BRIDGE 9266) Charles Wuorinen: Music for Violin and Piano (with Benjamin Hudson) (BRIDGE 9008); Justin Dello

Joio: Two Concert Etudes, Sonata (BRIDGE 9220).

A native of White Plains, N.Y., Mr. Ohlsson began his piano studies at the age of 8. He attended the Westchester Conservatory of Music and at age 13 entered the Juilliard School. His musical development has been influenced by a succession of distinguished teachers, most notably Claudio Arrau, Olga Barabini, Tom Lishman, Sascha Gorodnitzki, Rosina Lhévinne, and Irma Wolpe. Although he won First Prizes at the 1966 Busoni Competition in Italy and the 1968 Montréal Piano Competition, it was his 1970 triumph in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw, where he won the Gold Medal, that brought him worldwide recognition. Mr. Ohlsson was awarded Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Prize in 1994 and received the 1998 University Musical Society Distinguished Artist Award in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Most recently, Mr. Ohlsson won in the "Best Solo Performance" category of the 2008 Grammy Awards for his "Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 3" (BRIDGE 9207).



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