

# SCRIABIN

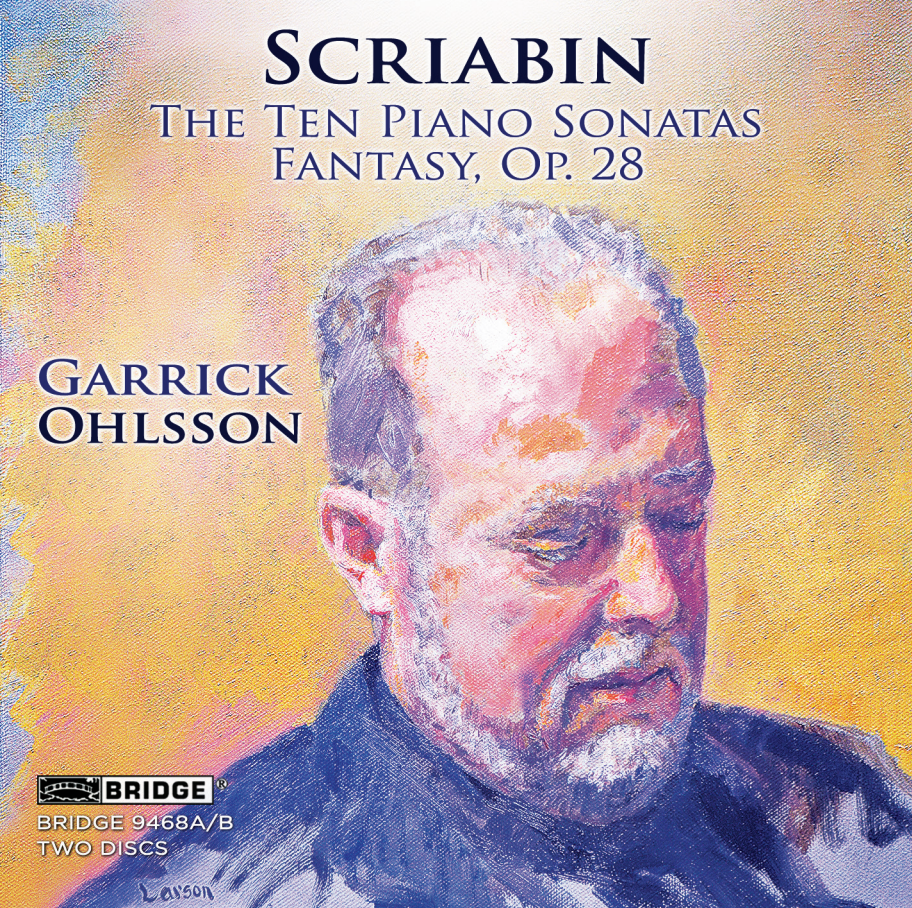
THE TEN PIANO SONATAS  
FANTASY, OP. 28

GARRICK  
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# Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

## Disc A (76:23)

### Sonata for Piano No. 1 in F minor, op. 6 (22:25)

- 1) I. Allegro con fuoco (7:44)
- 2) II. Adagio (5:16)
- 3) III. Presto (3:17)
- 4) IV. Funebre (6:08)

### Sonata for Piano No. 2 in G sharp minor, op. 19 "Sonata Fantasy" (12:17)

- 5) I. Andante (8:26)
- 6) II. Presto (3:51)

### Sonata for Piano No. 3 in F sharp minor, op. 23 (19:39)

- 7) I. Drammatico (5:56)
- 8) II. Allegretto (2:43)
- 9) III. Andante (4:57)
- 10) IV. Presto con fuoco (6:03)

### Sonata for Piano No. 4 in F sharp major, op. 30 (9:43)

- 11) I. Andante (4:17)
- 12) II. Prestissimo volando (5:26)

### 13) Sonata for Piano No. 5 in F sharp major, op. 53 (12:12)

**Disc B (71:23)**

- 1) **Sonata for Piano No. 6, op. 62 (12:59)**
- 2) **Sonata for Piano No. 7 in F sharp major,  
op. 64 "White Mass" (12:39)**
- 3) **Sonata for Piano No. 8, op. 66 (15:18)**
- 4) **Sonata for Piano No. 9, op. 68 "Black Mass" (8:19)**
- 5) **Sonata for Piano No. 10, op. 70 (12:32)**
- 6) **Fantasy for Piano in B minor, op. 28 (9:34)**

**Garrick Ohlsson**  
piano



## **Genius in Radiance and in Darkness: Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)**

### **Notes by Matthew Harrison**

The polarizing light of Alexander Scriabin's genius has long held his devotees in thrall and his detractors lost in the multi-hued shadows of the composer's inner world. Between these poles lies the vivid art of a master craftsman and self-proclaimed musical savior. Scriabin was not only at the forefront of the avant-garde musical scene, he was certain by the end of his life that his music would palpably change the world. Despite his bizarre beliefs, his compositional technique is steeped in a deep knowledge of musical craft, which he learned with classmate Sergei Rachmaninoff at the Moscow Conservatory. Though he did write a handful of masterful orchestral pieces, it was to the piano that Scriabin was devoted, writing the vast majority of his works for the instrument he played as a virtuoso with an inimitable sound that attracted followers and even worshippers. Scriabin slipped comfortably into the role of mystic prophet, and his later works reflect his growing mystical sense of reality.

The ten piano Sonatas and single Fantasy of Scriabin presented in this recording cover a bewildering expanse of territory. The First Sonata is written in a virtuosic style in the explosive vein of Lisztian infused Russian pianism. Already in this work of 1892 the mature Scriabin shines through even as he absorbs the tradition of the grand manner. The arrangement of the four movements is absolutely arresting, with the funeral march cast as the final

dramatic episode. The shift of this movement to the end was brought about by a personal crisis which Scriabin wrote about in his journal:

*Twenty years old: the injury to my hand has developed. The most important event in my life. Fate sends me forth on my mission. The obstacle to the achievement of the goal so highly desired: fame, glory . . . The first serious failure in my life. . . Composition of my first sonata with a funeral march.*

Despite a hopeless diagnosis from the medical profession, Scriabin nursed his hand back to health. Completing this work was a kind of exorcism for Scriabin, and it would not be the last.

The Second Sonata is a striking departure from the language of the first, a transformation not only compositionally but spiritually as well. After laboring on the work for five years, the 1897 Sonata-Fantasy shows Scriabin in harmony with his inner creative world. Scriabin revealed that this sonata of two movements was inspired by

*“the influence of the sea..the first movement represents the quiet of the southern night on the seashore; the development is the dark agitations of the deep sea. The E major middle section shows caressing moonlight coming after the first darkness of night. The second movement, presto, represents the vast expanse of ocean stormily agitated.”*

The iridescent harmonies and shimmering accompaniments of the first movement really do evoke Scriabin's inspiration, while the second movement works in Beethovenian dichotomy with the first, exploiting the principal of contrast with a fiendish movement of etude-like difficulty.

Scriabin returns to the four movement symphonic form for his Third Sonata, and each movement is exquisitely crafted. Written on the heels of the Second Sonata and completed in the same year, this is Scriabin's only mature foray in sonata form to follow such a traditional four movement formal plan, even as the *andante* third movement launches *attacca* into the heated final movement *presto con fuoco*. Yet despite the division into separate movements, Scriabin is already accelerating to his ultimate direction of a unified sonata structure, not only in the use of the *attacca*, but also in the opening rhythm that is to be found throughout the entire work as a unifying agent.

Six years separate the Third and the Fourth Sonatas, and in between lies the Fantasy of 1900, a work of a single movement which ascends to the height of Scriabin's late-romantic, hyper-sensuous, super-virtuosic style so completely as to retire this mode of writing from his compositional lexicon. It simultaneously points to the single movement form destined for his last five sonatas and their increasingly avant-garde language. Despite pages that are almost impossible to execute, the work is intoxicating for pianists and audiences alike. In later years Scriabin's aesthetic had moved so far beyond the language of this work he almost insisted on not acknowledging it.

In 1903 Scriabin returns to sonata form, and his Fourth Sonata is the last to be formally divided into separate movements. With this work he has crossed the barrier into what will become his late sonata style. Even the double bar line that ends the first movement is not so final: marked again *attacca* and without key change, the second movement bursts energetically onto the scene. However, Scriabin recalls the theme of the first movement for the glorious climax of this sonata, bringing his form into a full circle.

Shortly after finishing his symphonic *The Poem of Ecstasy*, Scriabin launched immediately into composing for the piano. Within a matter of days had worked out his Fifth sonata at the piano, needing only a couple more to commit it to paper. Scriabin himself wrote, “Today I have almost finished my 5<sup>th</sup> Sonata. It is a big poem for piano and I deem it the best piano composition I have ever written. I do not know by what miracle I accomplished it . . .” Scriabin does not exaggerate, for the music practically leaps off both page and piano, pulling player and listener seductively and dangerously into the palpating, languorous, heated world of his vision of ecstasy. Scriabin guides the pianist with a quotation on the first page of the score:

*“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!”*

Though the music seems to follow only the impulse of desire, it is tightly organized and keeps to the structural principals of sonata form. There is a dynamic tension that exists between the harmony and form of Scriabin's later works, and as he pushes tonality to its utmost limits he uses sonata form as a binding agent for his experimental and exotic harmonic language.

Scriabin composed his last five sonatas in two major bursts of compositional activity. Sonatas 6 and 7 were both composed between 1911 and 1912, and after the self-proclaimed miracle of the 5<sup>th</sup>, these works forge ahead in new compositional directions for the composer. Janus-like, this pair of sonatas represents light and dark forces of Scriabin's inner world. The 6<sup>th</sup> Sonata is a voyage into the dark shadow world for Scriabin, and was a work which Scriabin, though given to playing the premiers of his own works, was terrified of and refused to play in public. Demonstrating even a few bars was enough to make him shudder, and no wonder: the climactic moment is marked "the terror arises, it joins the delirious dance." The Seventh Sonata soon became a favorite work of the composer, who dubbed it "my White Mass." Adorned with markings such as "sparkling," "with a voluptuous radiance," "ecstatic," and "with an overflowing joy," Scriabin found his highest self in this sonata, which he could not perform enough.

Scriabin worked on his last three sonatas in the winter of 1912-1913, finishing them by the summer of 1913. All three of these sonatas push his own musical



boundaries further afield, and yet at the same time he binds himself more completely to his inherited compositional craft. Though these pieces may sound like dream-state improvisations, they are tightly wrought, intricately woven tapestries in which the sonata principal maintains its hold on the form, at times lurking powerfully in the background, at others brilliantly issuing forth in blinding splendor or terrific darkness. As Scriabin's harmonic language pushes away from the grasp of tonality, the forms and techniques he mastered as a student bring coherence and clarity to his musical thought. Scriabin himself was proud of his contrapuntal artistry in his late works. Additionally, the vibratory power of trills, used to great effect in the late works of Beethoven and Chopin, are featured in these three sonatas with an effect ranging from luminous to blazing.

The longest of the last three, the Eighth Sonata is the most inward looking of all of Scriabin's sonatas, a mysterious score of searching complexity. Not only was it the last of the final three to be finished, but, as with the Sixth, the composer never performed this work publicly. Though the sonata form binds the many parts of the structure together, it is more subtly felt here than in the other two of the group, and the maze-like development is a puzzle in sound.

The demonic Ninth Sonata is the most powerfully conceived of the last three sonatas, a return to the world of the sixth but here amplified and concentrated

to become the crown jewel of all of Scriabin's darker works. Though he did not himself name it the "Black Mass," he approved of the appellation, by which it is universally known. The entire work seems to continually amplify its force, working into a frenzy before calling back the opening motive.

The luminous Tenth Sonata is a return to the natural world for Scriabin. Known as the "Trill Sonata," Scriabin called it "a sonata of insects. Insects are born from the sun...they are the sun's kisses." The trills grow in splendid beauty to radiant bursts of light that captures again the purity which works against the dark side of Scriabin.

By the end of his life, Scriabin had come to see himself as a kind of Messiah. He viewed his birth on Christmas as significant, his early death on Easter in 1915 prevented him from realizing his "Mysterium," a visionary work planned to propel not only his listeners but indeed indeed the entire world onto a higher plane of existence through the use of music with smell, touch, dance, light, and color, all fused together in a quasi-liturgical rite. The progression of Scriabin's works towards this final unrealized point is highlighted in his sonatas, which chronicle the development and unfolding of a unique voice which to this day sings unlike any other in music.



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 long regarded as one of the world's leading exponents of the music of Frédéric Chopin, 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. To date he has at his command more than 80 concertos, ranging from Haydn and Mozart to works of the 21st century, many commissioned for him. This season that vast repertoire can be sampled in concerti ranging from Rachmaninoff's popular Third and rarely performed Fourth, to Brahms Nos. 1 and 2, Beethoven, Mozart, Grieg and Copland in cities including Philadelphia, Atlanta, Detroit, Dallas, Miami, Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, Liverpool, and Madrid ending with a spring US West Coast tour with the St. Petersburg Philharmonic conducted by Yuri Temirkanov. In recital he can be heard in LA's Walt Disney Concert Hall, New York, New Orleans, Hawaii and Prague.

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