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Unity of Sense and Spirituality in Scriabin's *Prometheus*

Introduction

A “mad dreamer” ... a megalomaniac ... one who considered himself the Messiah ... a man whose vision was to unify, transfigure, and deify humanity through an experience of ecstasy which would destroy and create a new Universe (Sabaneev 1966, 263; Triarhou 2016, 3).

Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915) proposed to accomplish this through a multisensory fusion of art and religion.¹

This paper was written for a course on different ways of listening to twentieth-century music. As part of the assignment, it was encouraged to find alternate ways to experience listening.

Therefore, this paper's primary focus is to explore Scriabin's *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, Op. 60 (1910) from a multisensory listening perspective and to respond with my own multisensory art. In doing so, my goal is to examine music influenced by colour-tonality association (originally synesthesia) and to enhance personal understanding and experience of it. Since my research showed a need to consider listening approaches other than multisensory, my paper's secondary focus is to relate structural and spiritual listening to multisensory listening in terms of Scriabin's work.

1. In this paper, I make no distinction between religion and spirituality.

My paper is divided into three parts. In the first section, I will introduce multisensory listening. I will provide its context, examine synesthesia from musical and scientific perspectives, and discuss Scriabin's particular form of synesthesia. The next section will deal with *Prometheus*. I will show how a structural approach to *Prometheus* is closely tied to the multisensory approach. The meaning and themes within *Prometheus* are closely tied to Scriabin's interest in Theosophy, and I will examine how his spirituality generates the multisensory character of his music. The final section of the paper will consist of two personal artistic responses that were created with a multisensory approach while listening to *Prometheus*. The responses consist of stream-of-consciousness writing and poetry.

Multisensory Listening

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, anthropologists were fascinated by the senses, but in an age that elevated science and logic above sensing and feeling, sensation was considered primitive and characteristic of "less-evolved" humans (Howes 2003, 3, 5). After the World Wars, sensory exclusion played an important role in anthropology; auditory and visual domains were "removed" from the sensorium and studied separately (Howes, 6-8). Kayser claims that the study of sensory interactions began in the 1950s (Kayser 2007, 27), but as early as the 1930s, psychologists found that synesthetic perception was not as uncommon as previously thought (Peacock 1985, 488). In 1935, Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux proposed that sensations functioned as "a coherent whole" rather than in isolation from each other (Howes, 10-11). Current research (cited by Kayser) shows that the capabilities of one sense can be increased when combined with another sense (Kayser, 28-29). In one example, subjects had a greater

chance of perceiving a flickering light at decreasing intensity when it was precisely synchronized with a short sound (Kayser, 28).

Synesthesia

The term synesthesia comes from two Greek words, the first, *syn*, meaning “union,” and the second, *aesthesis*, meaning “sensation” (Allen-Hermanson and Matey n.d., n.p.). Synesthesia is a situation where one sense is associated with or triggers another sense. Steve Odin, professor of philosophy, has described the phenomenon as a harmony of “sense-impulses” generated by art (Odin 1986, 256). He proposes that the experience of beauty requires “intersensory awareness” and therefore “aesthetic experience, in its deepest meaning, is precisely *syn-aesthetic* experience” (Odin, 258). Indeed, the terms used to describe elements of art may imply a different sense than the primary sense with which we perceive the art. For example, melody is often thought of as a “line” or “curve”; different timbres of instruments provide “color”; the lighting of a painting is described as “low” or “high” in “key” or “pitch”; painters may have “tone” (Donnell and Duignan 1977, 79-80).

Music and Synesthesia

Perhaps the most familiar example of synesthesia is “coloured hearing” where colour is associated with pitch, key, or words. Scriabin’s friend, Leonid Sabaneev, suggested: “Colors, on the one hand, and sounds, on the other hand, engender various moods, often similar to one another, therefore the association of colors and sounds arises”; this connection may be termed “association by similarity” (Galeyev and Vanechkina 2001, 358). Musicologist Kenneth Peacock

expands on Sabaneev's idea by saying that musical synesthesia may be based on compositional style, timbre, pitch, or tonality. He also notes the following additional patterns:

- "Certain colors fit "moods" of music.
- Lines of different color are often associated with instruments of different timbre.
- Photism² patterns are frequently related to music, i.e., smooth lines accompany graceful music, and jagged lines accompany syncopated or staccato passages.
- Photisms expanding within the visual field are related to an increase in volume or rise in pitch.
- Colors become lighter and increase brightness with the rise of pitch or quickening of tempo." (Peacock, 489-90)

In terms of tonality, Sabaneev (1929) found that "the more complex the key ... the more complex and fantastic is the colour associated with it." For example, simpler harmonies related to "pure" colours, but more complex harmonies such as flat keys were "connected with metallic, glittering colours, with lustre and reflections" (Peacock, 493). In spite of this, not all composers agree on colour associations. Although Scriabin and synesthete Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov both connected flat keys to darker colours (ibid), they often linked different colours to different tonalities.

Science and Synesthesia

A scientific investigation of synesthesia can be challenging because of the subjectivity of its data source, an individual's personal experience, and because of the question of symbolic synesthesia versus true synesthesia (Harrison and Baron-Cohen 1994, 343). True synesthetic experience relates to "physiology, psychiatry, neurophysiology and medicine" whereas symbolic synesthesia is a topic for "psychology, aesthetics, art theory and semiotics" (Galeyev 2001, 363). Today, synesthesia refers to an "involuntary neurological condition" (Gawboy and Townsend 2012, 3),

2. Photism is a "synesthesia visual sensation" (Photism n.d., n.p.)

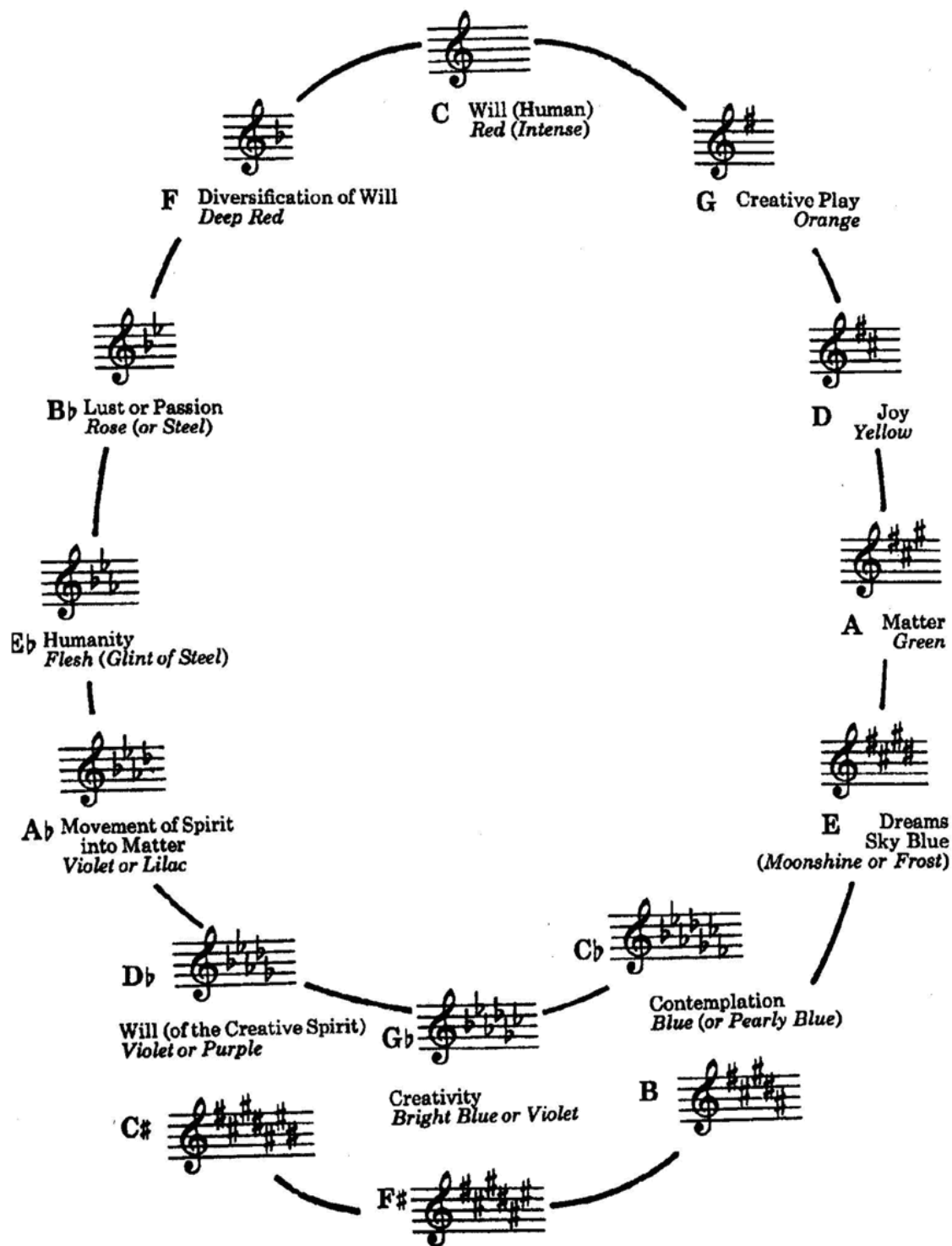
but one hundred years ago, during Scriabin's time, the term was used to describe "cross-sensory phenomena" resulting from any "neurological, psychological, pathological, artistic, intellectual, spiritual, or mystic means" (ibid). Because of this, and since there was limited technology that could be used to study synesthesia, it is quite difficult to determine whether historical figures experienced true synesthesia.

Scriabin and Synesthesia

We have no way of knowing for certain whether Scriabin's synesthesia was true or metaphorical because methods and tools to properly examine the case were not used or were not available at the time (Harrison and Baron-Cohen, 345). However, based on statements made by Leonid Sabaneev, a musicologist and scientist, and from Scriabin himself, it seems doubtful that he was a synesthete in the modern sense of the term. Neurologist Oliver Sacks (2008) stated that Scriabin's tone-colour associations "may have represented a conscious symbolism rather than actual synesthesia" (Triarhou, 4). Sabaneev said, "I know that originally he [Scriabin] recognized clearly no more than three colors—red, yellow, and blue, corresponding to C, D, and F-sharp respectively. The others he deduced rationally, as it were, starting from the assumption that related keys correspond to related colors; that in the realm of color the closest relationship coincides with proximity in the spectrum; and that as regards tonalities [sic] it is connected with the circle of fifths" (Gawboy and Townsend, 3-4). Indeed, Scriabin stated that "the three colors, which are clear to me, gave me three supports" and he was fully convinced that his theoretically constructed associations were "universal." He said, "It cannot be personal, there must be a principle, must be oneness" (Galeyev and Vanechkina, 358).

For Scriabin, who had relative pitch, each key had a particular colour and characteristic, and some keys also were associated with a certain scent. Influenced by his interest in Theosophy, a philosophy dealing with humanity's knowledge of the divine, he distinguished between "spiritual" tonalities and "earthly, material" tonalities; for example, the three associations that were the most obvious to Scriabin (according to Galejev and Vanechkina) were F sharp major, which was blue and spiritual, and C major and F major, which were red and earthly (ibid). According to Peacock, Scriabin considered F sharp major to be ethereal, and associated C major with the odor of soil (Peacock, 497). The image on page 7 shows Scriabin's colour and character associations with each key. To whatever degree Scriabin experienced synesthesia, it is certain that colour-tonality associations played an important role in his compositions.

But they are not the most significant facet of his music, rather a means to an end. Spirituality and unification of all art forms were of paramount importance to Scriabin, and he intended to achieve them via his synesthesia. He said, "Through music and color, with the aid of perfume, the human mind can be lifted outside or above merely physical sensations into the region of purely abstract ecstasy and intellectual speculation" (Triarhou, 3-4). Although tonality and colour existed simultaneously for Scriabin, he considered his "light-sound synesthesia" to be even more meaningful, and this gives his music radiance and brilliance (Galejev and Vanechkina, 360).



“Musico-Chromo-Logo Schema” developed by Vanechkina and Galejev (Gawboy and Townsend, n.p.)

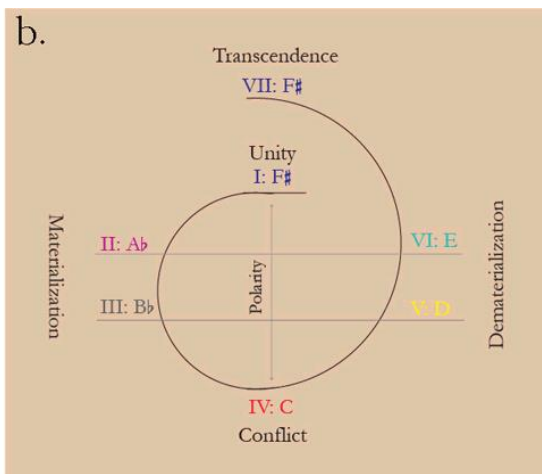
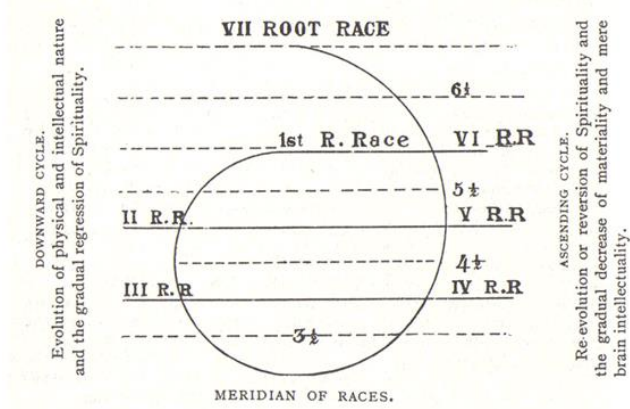
Prometheus

Structural and Multisensory Approaches

Prometheus was the first music to incorporate light, a “light symphony” according to Sabaneev (Sabaneev, 257). The score featured the *tastiera per luce*, an electric colour keyboard invented by Scriabin and created by the physicist Alexander Mozer (Leggio 2014, 79). The *luce* score had a fast part and a slow part, each notated with pitches. Although Scriabin believed that *Prometheus* was “resistant to aural analysis,” he said that the fast *luce* part made the tonality “more evident” (Gawboy and Townsend, 7). *Prometheus* was the first large-scale work in which he avoided major/minor tonality and instead constructed it from transpositions of the “mystic chord”³ or “Prometheus chord,” a chord made up of six pitches similar to the whole-tone scale, for example C, D, E, F#, A, Bb. The colours of the fast *luce* part represent the roots of the “mystic chord” thereby indicating harmonic changes (Gawboy and Townsend, 4, 5, 7). The slow *luce* part denotes a larger structure that Scriabin described as “correspond[ing] to the whole-tone scale, beginning on F# and going by whole steps again to F#. At the beginning is the spiritual, the color blue, then it goes over the other colors to the color red—which is the material, and returns again to blue” (Gawboy and Townsend, 9). In addition, he indicates the slow *luce* part as “correspond[ing] to the involution and evolution of the Races,” a philosophy of human development from Helena Blavatsky’s theosophical tome *The Secret Doctrine* (ibid). This idea, shown in the image on page 9, involves the inverse relationship of the material and the spiritual throughout the development of the Races (ibid).

3. “Mystic chord” and “Prometheus chord” refer to the same chord. The terms were coined by Arthur Eaglefield Hull, an English music critic, and Leonid Sabaneev, respectively.

a. EVOLUTION OF ROOT RACES IN THE FOURTH ROUND.



The Similarity Between Blavatsky's Diagram and the Slow *Luce* (Gawboy and Townsend, n.p.)

a. Blavatsky's diagram of the Races' involution and evolution (Blavatsky 1888, 990)

b. The slow *luce* of *Prometheus*

Meaning/Themes

Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) was a Russian philosopher and a well-travelled émigré who co-founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875. Blavatskian Theosophy is a philosophy dealing with the relationship between the cosmos and the divine, especially the “knowledge and practice derived from a divine source” (Santucci 2008, 8). This interplay between the material and the spiritual that is fundamental to her philosophy, and that has already been mentioned regarding her idea of Race involution and evolution, can also be seen within her interpretation of the Greek myth of Prometheus. From Blavatsky's perspective, Prometheus simultaneously represented divinity and humanity. Regarding the divine symbolism, Blavatsky related Prometheus, who was “tortured in punishment for bequest of fire to humankind,” to Jesus Christ, the son of God who suffered for humanity (Gawboy and Townsend, 8). Regarding the human symbolism, she viewed Prometheus' theft of fire as symbolic of the beginning of human spiritual enlightenment and “the journey toward divine spiritual reunification” (ibid). But not

only did Blavatsky explore the relationship between divine and human symbolism in the Prometheus myth, she also paralleled Prometheus with Christ and Lucifer in terms of their associations to “light,” Christ being “the Light of the world” and Lucifer meaning “light-bearer” (ibid). Furthermore, Blavatsky saw Lucifer as representative of “Fire, Light, Life, Struggle, Effort, Thought, Consciousness, Progress, Civilization, Liberty, [and] Independence” (ibid), terms which suggest human development and thereby indicate again the opposition or coexistence of the divine/spiritual and the human/material.

Perhaps as a result of Scriabin’s interest in Theosophy, the ideas within *Prometheus* are closely tied to Blavatsky’s views on the Prometheus myth, especially in regards to spirituality, fire, and light. The concept of light appears in *Prometheus* as visible coloured light provided by the *tastiera per luce* (described already), thematic light associated with Lucifer and energy, and also with references to fire, as the title *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* suggests. An example of the association between light, Lucifer, and energy is found in Scriabin’s program notes at the premiere of *Prometheus*, which read: “Prometheus, Satanas [sic], and Lucifer all meet in ancient myth. They represent the active energy of the universe, its creative principle. The fire is light, life, struggle, increase, abundance, [and] thought” (ibid). Scriabin’s description of fire is remarkably similar to Blavatsky’s description of Lucifer. Some of the references to fire are found in the unpublished first-edition score of *Prometheus*, known as the Parisian score. This manuscript contains phrases such as “flame kindles and grows brighter,” “flares and splinters of flame,” and “blazing stronger” (Gawboy and Townsend, 12). Scriabin’s ideas were ahead of his time, and when *Prometheus* was published, technology was unable to create what he envisioned: “dynamic changes of light intensity and fantastic special effects such as tongues of flame, lighting, fireworks, and sparks” (Gawboy and Townsend, 2). *Prometheus* premiered in Moscow

in 1911 but the equipment for the *tastiera per luce* failed (van Campen 2008, 53). The first performance with colour took place in 1915 in Carnegie Hall, New York, ironically shortly after Scriabin's death. The colour organ, *chromola*, that was developed specifically for the concert by Preston Millar of the Edison Testing Laboratories, was unable to fully convey Scriabin's intentions. As stated by a review from the *New York Times* (March 21, 1915, section 2, p. 12), "So far as the lights were concerned, it could not be discovered how they added to or intensified the meaning of the 'music'" (Leggio, 83). The first successful performance of *Prometheus* occurred in 1972 in London, over 60 years after its creation.

Spiritual and Multisensory Approaches

The importance of a multisensory listening approach to *Prometheus* is more broadly understood in the context of *Mysterium*, Scriabin's last and unfinished work which was to fully realize his ideas. Since Scriabin's artistic output was united as "one great continuous poem, of which the individual works are merely episodes," each new work became the "logical outcome of its predecessor" as meaning was clarified in its "successor" (Newmarch 1915, 330). In the Parisian score, Scriabin indicates "inferno, the whole world engulfed" and "cataclysm, all in fire" (Gawboy and Townsend, 13). This foreshadows Scriabin's conception of the apocalypse to be accomplished by *Mysterium*. After *Mysterium's* intended week-long performance in a Himalayan temple, a setting in which "spiritual communion and all-unity" (Ballard 2012, 214) could take place between audience and performers, this "impossible, ritualized *Gesamtkunstwerk*" would end the world through the use of a "mythic symbolist libretto, multi-sensory stimulation, and new tonal combinations" (Gawboy and Townsend, 13). Scriabin's search for unification of

senses brought forward in *Prometheus* was to culminate in *Mysterium* with the combination of music, coloured lights, mist, incense, fragrance, drama, poetry, and dance (Triarhou, 3).

Scriabin's multisensory approach and his spirituality are deeply intertwined. His obsession with the end of the world, as evidenced in his plan for *Mysterium*, and his fascination for Theosophy are closely linked and shed light on one reason for the sensorial focus of his music. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky describes a "powerful energy" of the universe, a "mystic vibration" with multisensory properties Sound, Touch, Colour, and Light (Gawboy and Townsend, 14).

Scriabin's program notes for *Prometheus* emphasize energy, and in the context of Blavatsky's philosophy, this energy can be linked with light. For Scriabin, sound was light was vibration was transfiguration was the end of the world. Boris de Scholezer, Scriabin's brother-in-law, explained on his behalf, "There is no doubt that if we could make visible all vibrations of the air mass produced in the vicinity...of a performance of Scriabin's *Prometheus* – we would find that all objects, including our own bodies, vibrate in such complex rhythms as to induce the disintegration and transformation of matter" (ibid).

For Scriabin, music was "the servant of religion" (Sabaneev and Pring 1931, 790) and his music was completely shaped by his spirituality (Newmarch, 329). If not to carefully express his philosophy, religion, or spirituality, music had no purpose or meaning for Scriabin (Newmarch, 329). Although influenced by various religious and philosophical sources such as Blavatsky, the Scriptures, and others, Scriabin did not align himself with any in particular, but pursued a spirituality of his own (Vanechkina and Galeyev 1998, 183; Sabaneev and Pring, 791).

Ultimately Scriabin strove for fusion, of sensations, of art, of art and religion, and of humanity. With the multisensory aspects he called for in *Prometheus* and *Mysterium* (sound, coloured

lights, mist, fragrance) and the combination of art forms (music, drama, poetry, and dance), he intended to break boundaries between people, facilitate a oneness of humanity, and create conditions that would enable a universal spiritual experience. Simon Morrison, historian of Russian music, states that through Scriabin's search for spiritual transformation through art, he has "revealed the transparency of the material world and offered glimpses into hidden realities" (Ballard, 197). Sabaneev had this to say about Scriabin's idea of religion and his quest for art-religion:

I have never subscribed to his religious exoticism and eroticism, but I must say that his music is marvellously adapted to express these experiences characteristic of him. To me his idea of religion is too decorative and physiological, and his ecstasy too often approximates to intoxication – and they are two very different things. But we must be able to discriminate between these personal touches and the essence of the idea of an art-religion, and to appreciate the grandeur of the latter. It cannot be denied that there is an incomprehensible grandiosity and a specific splendour in his conceptions – his visions of the blending of all the arts; of symphonies of lights and aromas; of the mighty exorcism which was to bring mankind to a state of supreme ecstasy, followed by 'an awakening to another existence.' (Sabaneev and Pring, 791)

Responses

Stream-of-Consciousness Writing

Anxiety. Motion in space. I can feel my heart beating. My right eye has a tear, but not from emotion. My eyes are closed. The sound hits me from the speakers. The flute plays a liquid melody. The strings sound like beating wings. The piano stirs up the memory of a feeling.

Nostalgia. Excitement and adrenaline. I feel relaxed outside but agitated inside. The sweet piano notes feel like smooth blue pearls. Like crystals, suspended repetitions from the ceiling. The dancelike theme is like vertical objects in space. The violin is gold and bronze and like a fan.

Windblown bits of paper and smoke. It becomes a thick plume, opaque. I am looking down on a village at night, full of activity and lights, sparkling and flickering. A dramatic procession.

Purple and gold. Rich and velvet. But now lonely and distant, calm. The beautiful resonance of the piano is like sweet golden tea, liquid. The oboe is like a mirror. Sharp edges, but flat and beautiful. The flute is like moving upward through a crystal cylinder. It is high and bright, full of light and brilliance. Golden and sunlight. Sparkles. Still and hovering. Rich. Deep water.

Anticipation of violins. Brass like a menacing sharp sword. Turbulent, dark, rising up like smoke, thick mist so dark purple it is almost black. But suddenly high and light and suspended but growing. It is all golden, triumphant, and pointless. Pale blue, thin crystals like needles.

Waves wash over me, small particles. Translucent swirls. Explosions of purple, blinding and sharp. Confusion. Pulsing light that will never submit. Singing crystals like wind chimes, they sound from different positions in the deep column of vertical space. Rolls of turquoise and blue.

The rich burgundy velvet violin sound becomes thin and golden. It fades into green and aqua waves. Silver sharp crystals. Strings of tiny beads, strung up in the light. Dust particles

suspended in sunlight. The silence of looking directly into the sun is deafening. I am cold. It became dark blue and green. Shadows, and the light is distant. I feel like I am floating. Long and curly shapes. It is bright green and exuberant. Sharp points. Silver sheets. The crystals bang together, and it is awful. Beautiful voices, I have goosebumps and I feel tears in my nose. Wonderful waver in the women's voices. It is slow and swirling, a mess of glorious sound, like a tornado, fading away into the crystals. A lonely violin like a thread in the silence, soft like a cave. Frightened piano, searching. We are moving very fast through the cave. Finally into the yawning space.

During my first time listening to *Prometheus*, I decided to respond with stream-of-consciousness writing based on sensations while listening. Most of the sensations (if they can be called that) happened in my mind as reactions to the sounds I heard; for example, I did not literally see colours or shapes, rather I imagined them based on the qualities I heard in the music. A few of the sensations were physical and not necessarily related to the music, for example, a tear. Some physical sensations (goosebumps) were brought on by the music and still others (anxiety, floating feeling) may have arisen as combination of my current physical state combined with the music.

Poetry

The intensity

builds into a point of light.

Exploding fragments.

*Motion and stillness,
agitated and tranquil,
miniature and grand.*

*The light is Being,
energy of sensation,
surrounding focus.*

*Suspension, stillness,
searching, splendour, worship, awe,
exuberance, deep*

*black space opens up
slowly. What power is there?
Unlike what we know.*

During my second listening, I wrote a poem whose verses have a 5-7-5 syllable pattern. This response was based on how I imagined the transfiguration of humanity, destruction of the universe, and humanity's encounter with the power of the universe (God). The poem is in order of how I wrote it while listening, but there is really no order, like a circle. Although there seems to be a progression, I think each verse completely describes *Prometheus* on its own. To me, the poem has the quality of a water droplet. There are five droplets, but when combined, they are still one droplet, like a circle.

Summary

During the course of researching this topic, I found several things that made my thesis potentially less effective. One is that although Scriabin gave great importance to tonality-colour association and was the first to write a colour symphony, he quite likely only had partial synesthesia (as we know it today) or did not have synesthesia at all. The second is that I realized *Mysterium* would be even more suitable for this project because it features a more heightened involvement with the sensorium than does *Prometheus*. “While Scriabin contemplated ways to arouse all five senses in the *Mysterium*, he conceived *Prometheus* as a more limited experiment focused on the interaction between sight and sound” (Gawboy and Townsend, 2). Finally, I proposed to take a multisensory approach but found that it was so closely connected to structural and spiritual approaches that I was unable to isolate one method. The multisensory approach that I chose to use seems in some ways to be secondary to the spiritual, because, for Scriabin, spirituality was paramount and it, in fact, generated many of the multisensory aspects. As a result of this, I am unsure if it is possible to truly isolate any one listening method; in any case use of multiple listening approaches enables a richer and fuller understanding of a subject.

There are sources that label Scriabin as “psychologically sick” (Sabaneev, 263), and while it is sure that he possessed complex and uncommon philosophies, is this in part an indication that his ideas were far ahead of his time? We have seen that his imagination was more advanced than the technology available to him, and his thinking, in terms of a fusion of the senses, predated anthropologists’ concept of the sensorium. With his “strangely beautiful language of ecstasy, and his aspiration to pierce the frontiers of this world, he was perhaps the best fitted among contemporary composers to celebrate the millennium which lies beyond the present strife”

(Newmarch, 330). But it remains to be explored further the possibility that his contemplations are ahead of even our own time. There is much we do not yet know about spirituality, science, the senses and their possible, if not likely, interactions. In what ways can we examine, through multisensory art or other means, the effects our sensations have on our ability to experience the spiritual?

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