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MODERN SYNESTHESIA AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIBIN'S COLOR MUSIC

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Scholars of synesthesia are divided between a biological/neurological conception and an artistic/creative conception. Although evidence shows that Scriabin's synesthesia was creative, many still believe that it was biological. This article outlines the impact of this belief on contemporary performances of Scriabin's color music, and discusses how an artistic conception of synesthesia informs the author's own realizations of *Prometheus*.

СОВРЕМЕННАЯ СИНЕСТЕЗИЯ И ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ ЦВЕТОМУЗЫКИ СКРЯБИНА

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Ученые, исследующие синестезию, разделяют биологическую (неврологическую) и художественную (творческую) концепции. Несмотря на тот факт, что синестезия Скрябина была творческой, многие до сих пор продолжают верить, что она была биологической. В этой статье представлено влияние этой веры на современные постановки цветомузыки Скрябина, а также обсуждается, как художественная концепция синестезии формирует собственные постановки «Прометей» самим автором.

Was Scriabin a synesthete? In 2001, Bulat Galejev and Irina Vanechkina published an article in the journal *Leonardo* that answered the question definitively for English-language readers.¹ They argued that Scriabin was not a synesthete in the modern clinical sense, but he did possess colored hearing. This distinction was crucial for understanding Scriabin's music, especially his *Prometheus, Poem of Fire*, op. 60. Galejev and Vanechkina's study of original documents revealed that Scriabin's part for *tastiera per luce* was based on upon a rationalized correlation of color and music – the product of philosophy and art, not biology. Despite its clarity, the article inspired a vigorous debate between its authors and reviewers before it went to press.² The reviewers refused to accept Galejev and Vanechkina's separation of synesthesia into two types, one

¹Bulat Galejev and Irina Vanechkina, "Was Scriabin a Synesthete?" *Leonardo* 34/4 (2001): 357–362.

²Galejev B., "Open Letter on Synesthesia," *Leonardo* 34 (2001): 362–363.

physiological-idiopathic, one artistic-metaphorical. For the reviewers, either Scriabin was an idiopathic synesthete or he was nothing.

This debate illustrated how much the conception of synesthesia has changed over the 20th century. Clinical interest in idiopathic synesthesia has been gaining momentum since the 1990s, fueled by advances in brain imaging technology.¹ This research has contributed to a body of knowledge that both validates and circumscribes the synesthetic experience as a purely neurological phenomenon. New research suggests that the color-music associations of idiopathic synesthetes tend to be quite stable over a person's lifetime and rarely follow conventional progressions such as the spectrum or circle of fifths. This conception has eclipsed the much broader idea of synesthesia that existed in the early 20th century, which included cross-modal sensory associations that were learned, creative, or aspirational. Differences between historical and modern conceptions often go unrecognized, generating confusion in scholarly texts and the popular imagination. Scriabin's contemporaries, such as Leonid Sabaneyev and the British psychologist Charles Myers, suggested that Scriabin constructed his system for its aesthetic effects.² From today's biological perspective, Scriabin's committed belief in the power of cross-sensory mappings would not be recognized as synesthesia.

The changing definitions have serious consequences for understanding and interpreting Scriabin's work. The belief that *Prometheus* is the direct manifestation of unwilling sensory perceptions stimulates much scholarly interest and public fascination. However, attributing the part for colored lights solely to biology undermines Scriabin's creative agency and diverts attention away from issues of artistic creation. When authors privilege biological synesthesia, they tend to view Scriabin's achievements with disappointment once the artistic nature of his system is discovered. In both situations, the narrow clinical idea of synesthesia prevents serious

¹ See Nunn, J. A., et al., "Functional magnetic resonance imaging of synesthesia: Activation of V4/V8 by spoken words," *Nature Neuroscience* 5 (2002): 371–375; also E. Paulesu, et al., "The physiology of coloured hearing: A PET activation study of colour-word synaesthesia," *Brain* 118 (1995): 661–676.

² Sabaneyev, "О звуко-цветовом соответствии [On sound-color accordance]," *Muzyka* 9 (January 29, 1911): 196–200; "Прометей" Скрибина [Scriabin's *Prometheus*], *Muzyka* 13 (February 26, 1911): 287–295; Charles Myers, "Two Cases of Synaesthesia," *British Journal of Psychology* 7 (1914–1915): 114.

investigation of the intellectual and creative basis of Scriabin's tone-color correspondences.

In America, performances of Scriabin's music with lights have become increasingly common as classical music programmers scramble to reach new audiences. However, it is often the case that performers ignore Scriabin's ideas and substitute light displays of their own devising. Could it be the case that modern conceptions of synesthesia actually encourage such practices? If Scriabin's color music can only be regarded as either the personal, spontaneous vision of a savant or the deception of a charlatan, what motivation do contemporary performers have to follow his indications for colored lights?

Such issues arose in a 2010 interview with acclaimed American designer Jennifer Tipton, who had collaborated with pianist Eteri Andjaparidze to create "Spectral Scriabin," a lighted performance of selected piano works.¹ The reporter, Alex Gallafent, alluded to the biological nature of Scriabin's colored hearing by stating, "he may have had a rare condition that meant he really did see colors associated with specific notes." Edith Finton Rieber, president of the Scriabin Society of America, confirmed, "Scriabin had synaesthesia and that's the overlapping of the senses." After Rieber's explanation of Scriabin's associations between specific colors and keys, Gallafent cautioned, "but that's not how Scriabin will be performed in New York this week...Tipton explored Scriabin's color structure for a while, but disregarded it in the end." As Tipton explained, "It's interesting, I worked with that quite a bit but there are places where [Scriabin's system] just doesn't work at all. For instance there were pieces where he, the key was in C major, I think, which was red for him, and the red just did not work for the piece at all." Gallafent concluded, "so Tipton and Andjaparidze have taken a more instinctual approach, matching color to music as they go along, and shaping a visual experience across an hour-long show."

Since Scriabin did not actually write out light parts for his piano pieces, one might argue that Tipton's sense of creative freedom is justified. However, modern designers frequently take similar liberties with

¹ Alex Gallafent, "Alexander Scriabin," *The World*, Public Radio International, October 25, 2010, accessed May 9, 2015. <http://www.pri.org/stories/2010-10-25/alexander-scriabin>.

lighting notation written into the score of Scriabin's *Prometheus*. In such cases, a single production embeds two contradictory performance practices. While Scriabin's notation for oboe or trumpet is respected by the performer and played as written, his detailed notation for colored lights is disregarded almost completely.

Why is this so? Cultural differences between classical music performance and theater design may be a factor. Since theatrical lighting is almost always regarded as an emergent feature of a production and not a structural one, designers are granted liberty to create a new lighting sequence for each production. However, the light part in *Prometheus* is a visual interpretation of the harmony and dramatic form of the music. "The colour *underlies* the tonality," Scriabin told the Charles Myers in 1915, "it makes the tonality more evident."¹ This suggests that, for Scriabin, the colors are just as structural as the "tonality" expressed by the pitches themselves. When designers substitute their own color sequence for Scriabin's, this carefully crafted relationship between lights and musical structure is lost.

American critics have long argued that Scriabin's color-music system does not produce a visually engaging experience,² but many don't realize that Scriabin's vision for the lights in *Prometheus* extended beyond color associations for the keys. In *Prometheus*, there are two lines of color moving throughout, one that corresponds to the root of the underlying Prometheus chord, and a slower line that divides the work into seven color stages. These seven color stages both help articulate the work's form and connect the music to its theosophical program.³ In 1913, Scriabin wrote

¹ Myers, "Two Cases," 113.

² Clarence Lucas, *The Musical Courier* (1915), quoted in A. E. Hull, *A Great Russian Tone Poet, Scriabin* (London: Keegan, Paul, Trench & co., 1917), 227; H. E. Krehbiel, "Optical Tones and Aural Colors." *New York Tribune* (March 21, 1915): 11; Thor Eckert, Jr., "A Progress Report on Six Fine American Orchestras," *Christian Science Monitor* (May 25, 1983), 14; Adrian Jack, "Not Quite Such Divine Decadence," *The Independent* (Sunday, October 24, 1999).

³ Scriabin told Sabaneyev that the seven colors of the slow *luce* part represented the seven "races" in Helena Blavatsky's theosophic narrative of spiritual evolution. See Sabaneyev. *Воспоминания о Скрябина [Memories of Scriabin]* (Moscow: Klassika-XXI, 2000) 53. I include a more extensive discussion of the musical functions of the fast and slow *luce* part in Justin Townsend and my article "Scriabin and the Possible," *Music The-*

out detailed performance indications for the lights in a score now held in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris.¹ His notes indicate a dramatic crescendos and decrescendos in the lights, lighting qualities such as “pale, watery,” and special effects such as sparks, flames, and lighting. These effects would have been impossible to coordinate with the music using lighting equipment available around 1913. Subsequent advances in lighting technology allow Scriabin’s vision to be realized with more fidelity, but the Parisian score still remains a technical and artistic challenge.

Since 2010, the lighting designer Justin Townsend and I have worked together to produce three lighted performances of *Prometheus* based upon the Parisian score annotations.² We share Galejev and Van-echkina’s impulse to treat Scriabin’s notation for lights the same way a musician would regard his notation for the instruments.³ In other words, we play the colors and rhythms as they are written in the score, and interpret dynamic indications and effects as closely as possible given the constraints of technology and environment.

In our performance with the Yale Symphony Orchestra, we assigned the faster line of colors to a circular lighting installation located behind the performers.⁴ The twelve versa tubes radiating out from a central point was an homage to the twelve light bulbs on Scriabin’s original *tastiera per luce* designed by Alexander Mozer. A performer playing a midi keyboard controlled the changing colors and effects, accentuating the harmonic rhythm of the music. We projected the slower progression of colors onto the walls and ceiling of the hall, which also became a canvas for various special effects. This visual separation of the fast and slow *luce* parts clari-

ory Online 18/2 (June 2012): http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.2/mto.12.18.2.gawboy_townsend.html.

¹ Autograph score of A. Scriabin, *Prométhée, le Poume du Feu, pour grand orchestre et piano avec orgue, chœurs, et clavier a lumières*, op. 60 (Berlin and Moscow: Edition Russe de Musique, 1911), archived under the Bibliothèque Nationale catalogue number Res. Vma 228. It has been available for study only since 1978.

² Yale Symphony Orchestra, directed by Toshiyuki Shimada (February 13, 2010); Cape Cod Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Jung Ho Pak (September 22–23, 2012); and Utah State University Orchestra, conducted by Laura Jackson (November 23, 2013).

³ Galejev, “The Fire of Prometheus: Music-Kinetic Experiments in the USSR,” *Leonardo* 21/4 (1988): 383–396.

⁴ A video of the 2010 Yale Symphony Orchestra performance is available on YouTube, beginning at timepoint 9:40: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3B7uQ5K0IU>.

fied their different musical functions. We were particularly attentive to the dynamic shapes and lighting qualities indicated by the Parisian score annotations. At rehearsal 6 (YouTube video, timepoint 13:08), a muted red-violet suddenly transitions to a “leaden, terrible” grey, accompanied by a crescendo. At rehearsal 26, the end of the red color stage (timepoint 19:30), we used fiery motion to capture Scriabin’s idea that “flame kindles and grows brighter...blazing stronger...” The flames subside with the decrescendo leading into rehearsal 29. Scriabin’s indications for the celesta and piano figuration specifies “sparkling like sheet lightning” (timepoint 20:05).

The Parisian score offers a rich resource for performances precisely because Scriabin’s imagination was not limited by his sensory perception, nor was it constrained by the capacity of early twentieth-century lighting technology. The lighting concept of *Prometheus* exceeded the bounds of what was possible in 1910, and so requires generations of future collaborators to bring it to life. As technology evolves, we come closer to realizing Scriabin’s vision, provided we accept the invitation offered by the score. Galeyev and Vanechkina’s productions of the 1960s and 70s were an advance towards Scriabin’s futuristic concept, and my productions of the 2010s are simply another step. Like Scriabin, we can only imagine what will be possible in the decades to come.