

# Taste the Rainbow

YSO gets psychedelic with a historically-informed performance

By Daniel Stephen Johnson

## Yale Symphony Orchestra

8 p.m., Feb. 13. Woolsey Hall, Yale University, 500 College St. Free. \$10. 203-562-5666, shubert.com.

Alexander Scriabin could never be accused of being too modest in his ambitions. The work he had begun at the time of his death, *Mysterium*, was supposed to have been a week-long performance incorporating not only music and dance but smells, colored lights and even tactile sensations, presented in a Himalayan temple. It is only by comparison with the unfinished *Mysterium* that his final completed work, *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*, might seem less than ambitious, calling for only a full symphony orchestra, piano, organ, optional choir and colored lights.

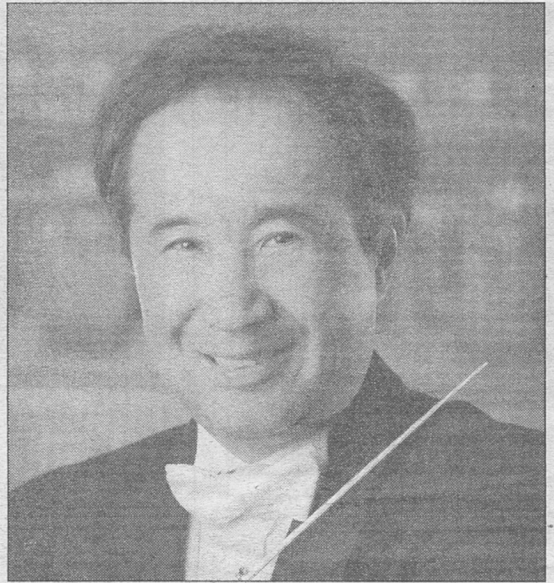
It goes without saying, perhaps, that most performances of *Prometheus* in the century since its composition generally forgo the light show, which was left out even at the premiere performance. But this Saturday, Feb. 13, the Yale Symphony Orchestra will revive the piece with full razzle-dazzle, along with Strauss' epic *Ein Heldenleben* and the premiere of a new work by undergrad Daniel Schlosberg.

This will not be the first time the Symphony has given Scriabin the Pink Floyd treatment he intended. In '69 and '71, as befitted the zeitgeist, the Yale Symphony Orchestra performed the work with full lighting effects, but advances in both musicological research and lighting technology suggest Saturday's performance, under the baton of Toshiyuki Shimada, may be the most faithful realization yet of the composer's audiovisual scheme.

I e-mailed Anna Gawboy, a scholar in the Yale Music Department whose work informs this new performance. "In 1913," she explains, "Scriabin wrote down what he wanted the lights to look like in a first edition of the score. This manuscript was lost until 1978 when it was archived in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. It contains directions for blazes of color, tongues of flame, fireworks and lighting — special effects which existed only in Scriabin's mind, and never could have been realized with early 20th century lighting technology."

In the lead-up to the 1911 premiere of *Prometheus*, Scriabin rejected as inadequate the tastiera per luce ("light-keyboard") he had designed. A key difference between that contraption and the organ of lights used in the present performance — and even between this performance and the YSO's previous efforts — is the use of vastly more responsive LED technology. LEDs, unlike con-

COURTESY OF TOSHIYUKI SHIMADA



Toshiyuki Shimada: Hearing colors.

ventional lighting rigs, can not only achieve the dynamic effects called for in Scriabin's recently unearthed notations, but also do so in perfect synch with the piece's musical elements.

The synchrony achieved by the Yale Symphony's LED system, designed by Justin Townsend, is in a way essential to realizing Scriabin's conception of the work: "as a 'symphony of sound' counterpointed by a 'symphony of light,'" explains Gawboy, not just a sequence of pretty colors. In addition to matching the mood of the music, Scriabin actually devised a system of correspondences between the 12 pitches of the piano and 12 chromatic shades. Each color, projected from a wheel of light at the front of the auditorium, will have been selected by the composer for its relationship to his tonal materials. Meanwhile, a second set of lights will change much more slowly — with, Gawboy has discovered, a subtle relationship to the piece's large-scale form.

A hundred years ago, the precise reproduction of these effects was something of a science fiction, the utopian fantasy of one of classical music's loftiest dreamers. In Gawboy's words, "Scriabin believed," quite literally, "that art could change reality."

But 2010, she notes, "is the future of the past. Now we are capable of realizing Scriabin's vision." She and her collaborators "wanted to bring an imaginary work from 1910 to life" — and very soon, they will.

editor@newhavenadvocate.com