

Next on

Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, October 1st, 2011, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

Aleksandr Scriabin (1872–1915). [Piano Concerto, Op. 20](#) (1896). Roland Pöntingen, Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Leif Segerstam. Bis 475. Tr 1-3. 24:15

Scriabin. [The Poem of Ecstasy, Op. 54](#) (1905–8). Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Robert Spano. Telarc 32630. Tr 9. 21:05



You needed a ticket to get into the funeral. All the services and all the tributes and all the writings bear witness that when Aleksandr Scriabin died in 1915 at the age of 43, Russia believed its standard-bearer of art had been taken away.

Ten years earlier, Russia could hardly have cared less.

Scriabin was not unknown, far from it. He was an extremely talented pianist, and had taught at the Moscow Conservatory. He was known as a composer, too, although some of his orchestral premieres had been ravaged by the public and the critics. But he performed his own inventive piano music often, and others began to. It seemed to flow out of him effortlessly.

He just couldn't gain traction, though, and he had himself to blame for much of this. He quarrelled with his friends and with his publishers (often the same people). He fought with those who could help him artistically and financially (Diaghilev, Koussevitzky). He moved constantly, left his family, and alienated those close to him. He drank. He struggled with demons emotional and, some said, mental.

Then he started getting ideas.

After 1900 and especially during the years he lived outside Russia (roughly 1904–1911), he increasingly studied symbolism—the philosophy sweeping a new generation of artists and writers—and theosophy. He made a pilgrimage to the London room where Madame Blavatsky, the spiritualist and founder of theosophy, had died a decade earlier.

Scriabin was no dilettante, but approached philosophy the way a homesteader approaches a new land, keenly observing the terrain and choosing just those elements necessary to construct a dwelling. He read books and talked for hours with other thinkers, and began processing it all the only way he could, by writing music.

The Piano Concerto of 1896 had been influenced by his early idols Chopin and Liszt, and is in a traditional multi-movement form. But in looking for new modes of expressing the inexpressible, as he would call it, he abandoned comfortable forms and harmonies. Works in one movement—Poems, without standard thematic development—began appearing. His music drifted away from the major/minor duality to a system of interpenetrating chromatics, small melodic cells, and specially constructed chords.

To Scriabin, this wasn't just theory. Music, he thought, was the highest of all the arts and was therefore the greatest bridge to that indivisible Reality in which all souls long to be united. We may already experience openings to that Truth in various ways throughout our life. These open windows, whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual, are moments of ecstasy, and so he composed *The Poem of Ecstasy* over four years. He had no interest in writing an exegesis on some philosophy. *The Poem of Ecstasy* was to be the bridge itself.

"I am a moment illuminating eternity... I am affirmation... I am ecstasy," he wrote. Now, Scriabin was the composer Russia was waiting for. Now, Russia started to care.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).