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career. Why did you want to focus exclusively on Scriabin's early works for this album?

The Imaginative Drama and Poetry of Alexander Scriabin: An Interview with Pianist Russell Hirshfield Russell Hirshfield is a performer, recording artist, and professor of music at Western Connecticut State University. He has given recitals of traditional and contemporary music throughout the United States and abroad. He studied in New Haven, the Eastman School of Music, Boston University, and the University of Colorado. Hirshfield's previous recordings include Mad Dances: American Music for Saxophone and Piano

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with saxophonist Dan Goble (Albany Records, 2010) and Seeker: The Piano Music of Piet Swerts (Phaedra, 2017). I asked him about the inspiration behind his most recent recording, an album of Alexander Scriabin's early piano works, the approach and

development of his performance, and how the disruption of the pandemic has affected his career both as a performer and as an educator. To begin, I wonder if you would first tell me a little about the project and the focus of this current album. You've recorded Scriabin's 24 Preludes, Sonata-Fantasy in G# Minor, Two Impromptus, Four Preludes, op. 22, and Études, op. 8, all of which were originally published in his early

I've been fascinated with Scriabin since my teens: the radical composer of the Fifth Sonata pushing the limits of tonality, rhythm, and traditional form. As I became more familiar with his prolific output, I realized there is a huge repertoire of exceptional music that predates his abstract Modernist works of the early 20th century. Prior to 1900, Alexander Scriabin composed well over 100 works for solo piano. These remarkable

pieces, mostly shorter works and miniatures, are well received by audiences and they deserve to be heard more often. I am interested in and inspired by the music of composers in the early part of their professional careers: the twenty-somethings striking out on

the Moscow Conservatory earned a medal in piano performance but was denied a degree in composition. The closer I look at and the more time I spend with Scriabin's works from the 1890s, the more I find the music of a confident, unabashed Romantic exploiting the full emotional and dramatic range of the instrument. Scriabin does so with a unique approach to the keyboard. The influence of Chopin is often noted (although usually overstated), as are the comparative studies with Rachmaninoff and Debussy. However, Scriabin's highly individualistic traits—the spontaneity, abandon, the searching qualities in his melodic and harmonic writing—are all distinct. He conveys a sense of curiosity and wonderment, all told with great freedom. It is not surprising that Scriabin would later become consumed with mystical and philosophical beliefs, and a self-aggrandizing sense of his creative powers. The extreme contrasts of his musical characters are shocking, especially within the 24 Preludes. The immediacy of these miniatures, strung

their own, establishing independence, and finding their voices. With Scriabin I find it particularly compelling because the 21-year-old graduate of

together, creates a powerful sense of urgency. The op. 11 set affirms an age-old principle: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I hope this is conveyed in the recording.

work.) There are also some accounts of Scriabin's tendencies to improvise and deviate from his own written compositions during live

In doing some research for this interview, I learned that Scriabin made some "recordings" of his pieces during his lifetime. (These recordings

were made on Hupfeld and Welte-Mignon reproducing pianos, instruments that created a paper roll facsimile of a performer's touch and pedal

performances. The recordings are an especially interesting point of comparison between your more contemporary interpretation and Scriabin's own voice and deviations. I was curious about how you crafted your interpretation of these early works, especially the Preludes. Did you listen to any of Scriabin's recordings, and did you consider any of his alterations as well? The Welte-Mignon Piano Rolls of 1910 provide a rare view of Scriabin the composer-pianist. In several Preludes from op. 11 and in the Étude No. 12, one can hear the impetuous and at times anxious sense of timing. His metric and rhythmic freedom create an improvisatory feeling, especially in his extreme approach to rubato (even by early 20th-century practices). These piano roll recordings were made some 15 years after the Preludes were published. The sound quality leaves much to be desired, as it's difficult to determine the extent to which the recording

his own. He played with great flexibility and insisted, too, that rhythm could not be notated in absolute terms. (But his scores, and rhythmic notation in particular, are logical to the reader). The Hupfeld Phonola Piano Rolls of 1908 include Scriabin's performance of the Sonata-Fantasy, opus 19. Here it's fair to ask if Scriabin's compositional and interpretive approaches were interwoven and continuously evolving. He was pushed by his patron and publisher Belaieff in 1897 to finalize the work for publication. Prolonged by a five-year wait, the Sonata-Fantasy took longer to complete, longer than any other work.

technology captures tone quality, pedaled sonorities, and articulation. Even so, one senses a composer obsessed, creating a musical world entirely

But more than a decade later, his recording shows that he was still considering revisions. The mannerisms or liberties that today's pianists might find overly indulgent—embellishing a melodic line, separating the hands in chordal passages marked together, double-dotting a dotted-rhythm, adding or repeating chords at cadence points—were central to the aesthetic of the

times. So, we must remind ourselves that the modern pianist mustn't be a slave to the printed page.

I would add that historic recordings by Scriabin's younger contemporaries—Heinrich Neuhaus, Vladimir Sofronitsky, Samuil Feinberg, to name a few—are also a magical window into the past. Finally, the Scriabin "sound" and the history of his recorded legacy are all thoroughly researched by Matthew Bengtson in *The Scriabin Companion*. Bengtson is also the author of the exceptional liner notes for the album.

Scriabin is sometimes notable for his ideas linking color theory and music theory. Whether or not he experienced synesthesia (I find it especially interesting that there is some doubt about this), I wonder if it is at all helpful for a performer to consider the "color" of a particular key. If not, do the keys carry any other associations for you as a performer? To clarify, I do feel some emotional connection to each Prelude, in each respective key, and I believe that is a testament to your complexity and artistry as a performer. Thank you. The extent to which Scriabin experienced a synesthetic condition is questionable and has been debated through the years. It is

surprising that the composer first experienced the phenomenon in his mid-30s. (Are we to believe he developed the neurological condition as an

adult?) But either way, it is not so critical that we determine whether or not he carried this physiological condition. What is most certain is that his intuition led him to imagine and symbolize the interrelationship of sound and color. During the late 19th century, artistic thought and creativity were preoccupied with the interrelationship of the senses in poetry, art, and music. Musical color, timbre, light, and fire, all these elements tied into Scriabin's musical aesthetic and seem inseparable from his artistic vision. Further, his philosophical, spiritual, and mystical beliefs led him to believe that his creative powers were divine. Scriabin "felt" colors with key areas, not individual pitches, and as his feelings for a musical passage intensified he envisioned color. His color

wheel and its correlation with the circle of fifths (the 12 major and 12 minor keys) is unique, and a rather fixed association of color with sound. Timbre and music depicting the intensities of light are increasingly central to Scriabin's aesthetic. The clavier à lumières (colored light keyboard) fashioned for Prometheus (1910) came about much later in his career, long after the pieces on Early Works were composed. The composer's choice of key for a musical composition is central to the character of the music. We have seen through the years how composers

have chosen C Major for preludes that have a very harmonious, or open sound. With the 24 Preludes, op. 11, we have a complete cycle that includes a prelude in each major and minor key. I am not surprised by some of the relationships of character and key area. Some examples include a lament in E Minor, love songs in D Major and A Major, agitation in F# Minor, a nightmare in B Minor, playful figures in F and G Major, F Minor for a stormy setting, and E b Minor for the tragic. Scriabin's great tragedy is that he died so young. He left the changing scene of classical music far too soon, and we can only wonder at what new

ideas and influences he might have pursued. Still, I think perhaps there are hints in these early works of his forward-looking, modern (perhaps sometimes wacky) ideas. The Études, for example, are almost basic in terms of the rhythm perhaps, or the arc of the melody, but there is also a syncopation and dynamism that is reminiscent of the emerging Impressionist movement and early jazz music. In your preparation for making these recordings, was it at all useful to also listen to the work and influences that were a part of Scriabin's early inspirations or studies? Certainly. The music of Chopin, as we've noted, was an important influence in Scriabin's early years. His catalog of the 1890s includes Preludes,

Études, Mazurkas, Impromptus, all forms favored by Chopin. The melodic and harmonic nature of his writing grew from that of Chopin, Liszt, and his Russian contemporaries. Although not nationalistic in character, there are echoes of Russian folk music in the modal writing (the Prelude, op. 11/15) and of Russian church music, (the tolling of bells in op. 11/16). In a general sense his use of unusual meters (5/4) and asymmetrical phrase lengths also recalls Russian folk melody. The music of Debussy allows for an interesting parallel with Scriabin. Both used extended harmonies and blended harmonies that are found in

popular styles and jazz. Scriabin and Debussy shared a fascination with musical timbre, the whole tone scale, augmented triads, and in general a sense of rhythmic freedom. The turn of the century is a rough marker, for both Debussy and Scriabin, as each developed an even more individualistic style. But as the 19th

century came to a close, Scriabin had already composed well over 100 works for solo piano; Debussy just 20 pieces, and he was nine years older. So, yes, familiarity with traditions that preceded Scriabin's work is important, as is playing the works of Scriabin's contemporaries. The longest pieces on the album are the two movements of the Sonata-Fantasy in G# Minor. Where the Preludes were brief statements

representing individual colors of the major and minor keys, the Sonata-Fantasy offers a range of colors and moods, following a recurring

second movement is a presto in perpetual motion. Scriabin was inspired by the sea after visiting the Baltic in 1892 and commented on its

thematic line that Scriabin introduces in the first bars of the Andante. This set seems to allow for more opportunities for overly dramatic playing, probably because these pieces are more expansive than the others. Where do you draw your own boundaries in terms of how to know when your performance has gone too far in one direction, or the other? The Sonata-Fantasy is the most extended work on the recording and has a very flexible form. The two movements are linked thematically and yet could not be more different from each other. The opening movement is spacious, lyrical, and highly sensuous in its decorative writing. The

influence on the Sonata-Fantasy. The musical references to the sea are not of the Impressionistic style later found in Debussy and Ravel's works,

but the flexibility depicted in the score (explicit and implicit) gives the performer a wide array of interpretive choices. So, yes, the Sonata-Fantasy allows the performer a more expanded, dramatic narrative. The first movement opens and closes in different keys; it's very unusual to begin in G♯ Minor and conclude in E Major. But for Scriabin E Major represented light blue, the tint of the ocean. Interpretations may vary from one day to the next, but with Scriabin this is especially so. It is interesting that you ask about drawing interpretive boundaries. Generally, we draw or set too many, and a tasteful performance would blur or soften boundaries without compromising the integrity

I find it helpful to record myself to get a clearer picture of interpretation, pacing, balance, and overall expression. As a matter of personal taste, I try to prioritize forward momentum and to use tempo rubato sparingly, because all too often it amounts only to time borrowed. In Scriabin's works, the freedom is already written into the melodic lines.

As I listened to your performance, I was struck by the overwhelming volume of notes and the range of difficulty of this program, as well as the

of a composition.

complexity of Scriabin's threading rhythms and various thematic lines. His pieces can almost seem as though there are several trajectories happening at the same time. I want to ask about your process for holding onto those threads and maintaining a forward momentum without allowing those lines to become blurry or not as distinct. Your playing has a clarity and precision that sounds effortless, but I imagine that sound quality must be particularly difficult to achieve when playing Scriabin. Is that quality of the sound—the interlacing, braiding threads and trajectories—mostly an indication of a complexity particular to Scriabin? Or, is that focus on clarity and precision something you cannot overlook (or underestimate) as a performer?

Yes, thank you. I do think it is important to strive for a clear sound in Scriabin, in Bach, in Messiaen, in all piano repertoire. There are challenges particular to Scriabin's writing.

It has its origins in the Romantic traditions, especially the études of Chopin and Liszt, whose concert pieces established technical and musical standards for aspiring pianists. Scriabin's 12 Études, op. 8, might be considered descendants of the works of the earlier masters, but Scriabin's pianistic approach to the keyboard further expanded the range and the variety of technical demands. There are dense chordal passages, overlapping melodic lines, accompanying figuration that interweaves throughout the various registers of the instrument, repeated chords, skips, and intervals and chords that are "unreachable" or better described as over-extended. In fact, at times the pianist should consider redistributing pitches from one hand/clef to the other in order to better navigate the writing. The challenges include sustaining and projecting melodic lines, balancing the two hands, voicing the various layers of sound, and achieving a dynamic range of sound and color. Further, Scriabin's rhythms are complicated, especially at first sight, and one must find a natural ease with the polyrhythms (or cross-rhythms) that fill his scores.

For all the unique virtuosity that's called for in the writing, one always has the sense that Scriabin was overwhelmingly committed to musical considerations, and to the imaginative drama and poetry of his music. Scriabin is notorious for developing a broadened use of the left hand. He composed wide-spread and at times demanding patterns that combine

bass and accompaniment. At the Moscow Conservatory, Scriabin was determined to match the virtuosity of his classmate Josef Lhévinne. Unfortunately, he strained his right hand while practicing Balakirev's Islamey and music of Franz Liszt. The injury to his right hand led to a spiritual crisis for the 20-year-old. He soon followed with compositions for the left hand alone and, in general, to a greater focus on capturing the power and beauty of the bass and middle registers of the piano. Returning to the question of a clear sound, a more varied use of the damper pedal is critical to enhancing sonority and a colorful sound. In

compromising on the desire for a sound that is both rich and yet is still clear, blended but not blurry, we must find a collection of pedal techniques —shallow depressing of the pedal, quarter-pedal, flutter pedal, gradual vs. quick dampening, to name a few. Pedal choices have to be carefully calibrated based on the instrument and the acoustics of the hall. These gradations in pedal use are all a matter of personal taste and may vary significantly from one performer to the next. These are some of the challenges we face at the keyboard when playing Scriabin. You are also a professor of music at Western Connecticut State University. I noticed on your website that your performance dates stop at about

the end of March 2020, when just about everything stopped here in the U.S. How has your teaching and performance schedule been affected by the pandemic? And if you are resuming classes and teaching in the fall, what advice or suggestions do you have for students who are getting ready to graduate and/or begin their music careers? Everything came to an abrupt halt in March, and performances in Antwerp, Krakow, and Serbia were all postponed indefinitely. Musicians

depend on audiences, on collaboration with colleagues, and in-person contact with our students. All these activities have been packaged online for the time being. Fortunately, technological advances are making it easier to live-stream, to record, and to teach online. So, near-term, we continue to make the virtual experience online as meaningful as we can. My students, the GenZ-ers, are well versed in technology and accustomed to being part of various online communities or groups. They already spend so much time in front of a screen and we now add to it with online classes and lessons! Interpersonal communication, artistic expression,

and a nuanced sound ... all these elements are to be boxed up in a virtual world. But we must also take into account that not all students have access to computers and to adequate Wi-Fi. Still, we have to find ways to reach them. My advice to students is to stay home. Take courses in music technology, digital media, entrepreneurship, and business, in addition to the required courses for the music major. The younger generation is highly skilled in social media and forever interconnected, and they'll need to

and choose what to post and when to share. And then finally, I'll conclude by asking, what's next? I've noticed that some performers are opting for outdoor or virtual/online performances.

leverage their technological skills to advance their careers. And remember that everything you post online, stays online. Prepare carefully; pick

Yes, absolutely. I'll be sure to post links of new recordings and online recitals. The pandemic is forcing musicians and music lovers to find new ways to collaborate and come together. I've commissioned and recorded a

Do you have any plans to do something similar, especially in regards to the promotion of the album?

number of works by the Welsh composer Rhian Samuel, and am pleased to be part of her recent online premiere of Isolation Suite. She has cleverly assembled five pianists from around the world, with each recording a movement of the Suite.

I've also commissioned the young American composer Timo Andres to compose a piano piece to be premiered and recorded in 2021. He is one of the brightest young composer-pianists writing today, so I am excited to see the new piece.

I am very fortunate to have worked with producer and recording engineer Judith Sherman, and hope that our collaboration will continue. The team at Parma Recordings has done an excellent job all around, including promoting the album. I am considering an Early Works II, as there are many more great works by Scriabin from the 1890s. So, my plans also include preparations of the Scriabin Piano Concerto to mark the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth in 2021.

SCRIABIN 24 Preludes, op. 11. Sonata-Fantasy in g#, op. 19. 2 Impromptus, op. 14. 4 Preludes, op. 22. 12 Études, op. 8/11-12 • Russell Hirshfield (pn) • NAVONA 6302 (63:00)

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