

CHAPTER 2

Scriabin and the Russian Silver Age

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Reflecting on the cultural ferment of late imperial Russia, philosopher and exile Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948) recalled,

It was an epoch of the awakening of independent philosophical thought, the blossoming of poetry, the sharpening of aesthetic sensuality, of religious anxiety and searching, of interest in mysticism and the occult. New souls appeared, new sources of creative life were discovered, new dawns were seen, feelings of decline and death were united with a feeling of awakening and with the hope for the transformation of life.¹

This era, which Berdiaev termed the ‘Russian cultural renaissance’, dismantled traditional divisions between art, literature, philosophy, history, and religion and abandoned the materialist worldview of the previous generation of Russian intellectuals in favour of exploring fundamental metaphysical questions underpinning human existence. The term ‘Silver Age’, coined by Russian émigré Nikolai Ofsyp in 1920s Paris to describe early twentieth-century literary movements like Symbolism that rejected the dominant realist aesthetic of the prior age, has been expanded by contemporary scholars to refer to ‘the entire complex of new trends in the spiritual-artistic sphere of the first third of the twentieth century’.² Thinkers and artists of the Silver Age re-established the centrality of questions concerning spirituality and aesthetics alongside social concerns. As historian Catherine Evtuhov has argued, this era witnessed a multifaceted quest perhaps best summarised by the penetrating query posed by philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900) in his 1897 work *Justification of the Good*: ‘Does our life ultimately have any kind

I would like to thank Andrew Demshuk, Polina Dimova, David Salkowski, and Elina Viljanen for their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

¹ Nikolai Berdiaev, *Samopoznanie (opyt filosofskoi avtobiografii)*, quoted in V. V. Bychkov, *Russkaia teurgicheskaiia estetika* (Moscow: Ladomir, 2007), 8.

² Bychkov, *Russkaia teurgicheskaiia estetika*, 7–9. This scholarly usage does not imply acceptance of the term ‘Silver Age’ as used by Vasili Rozanov (1856–1919) to contrast the lesser accomplishments of contemporary writers with an imagined ‘Golden Age’ of Pushkin and Gogol. On the construction of the Silver Age as a space of imagined identity in the Soviet and post-Soviet context, see Galina Rylkova, *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

of meaning?’³ For members of Russia’s late imperial artistic elite like composer Alexander Scriabin, for whom art and life were fundamentally intertwined, this question might be better expressed: *Does artistic creation ultimately have any kind of meaning?*

For the young Berdīaev, who witnessed the creative flourishing of Russian culture alongside the growing threat of world war in 1914, it was the act of artistic creation that provided a positive answer to Solov’ev’s question. Previous epochs of human history would be transcended and the full purpose of humanity achieved through free artistic creation, Berdīaev asserted in 1914. Art – the imperfect physical embodiment of a higher realm of Beauty – would be replaced by *theurgy* (‘divine action’), the spiritualization of the material realm through the inspired creative activity of human artists gifted with mystical insight. Free human artistic creativity would yield the next stage in the Christian mystery of sacrifice and world redemption: the spiritualization of the physical world. For Berdīaev, theurgy was thus ‘the joint action of a person with God. It is divine action (*bogodeištvo*), divine-human creation (*bogochelovecheskoe tvorchestvo*)’.⁴

At first glance, a world of difference seems to separate Berdīaev’s Orthodox Christian philosophizing from the Theosophically tinged worldview of Scriabin, for whom Christianity was a historical cult, equivalent (but not superior) to other historical forms of human religious experience. Indeed, one of Scriabin’s close friends, Leonid Sabaneev, later recalled that, in Scriabin’s view, ‘In actuality, Christ had never existed [...] the legend or ‘myth’ of Christ was [...] an occult and esoteric exposition of a certain Mystery that had once had its place in the “earthly realm”’.⁵ Nonetheless, Berdīaev insisted in 1914 that, of all contemporary musicians, it was ‘Scriabin alone’ who ‘prophesies of a new world epoch’, Scriabin alone who sensed that the dawning age of free artistic creation would be limited neither to ‘music nor sculpture’, but could be ‘only theurgic’.⁶ Moreover, Berdīaev argued, the path of artistic theurgy, which Scriabin intuitively sensed, was not his path alone, but ‘a Russian problem, the Russian tragedy of creation’.⁷

Scriabin’s untimely death on 14 April 1915 dashed any hopes of the composer completing his *Mystery* – the final work that Scriabin believed would unite all humanity in a final act of universal ecstasy and usher in the end of the material world. Nonetheless, even after the composer’s death, Berdīaev continued to insist that ‘[Scriabin] was an incredible example of the human creative path’, with burning significance for future artists.⁸ Philosopher and revolutionary Georgii Plekhanov

³ Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 6.

⁴ Nikolai Berdīaev, *Smysl tvorchestva: Opyt opradvaniia cheloveka* (Moscow: Folio, 2004), 219–20.

⁵ Leonid Sabaneev, *Vospominaniia o Skriabine* (Moscow: Muzykal’nyi sektor gosudarstvennogo izdatel’stva, 1925), 120–1.

⁶ Berdīaev, *Smysl tvorchestva*, 219–20.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Nikolai Berdīaev, *Filosofiia, tvorchestva, kul’tury i iskusstva* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994), 2:402.

(1856–1918), who popularised Marxist ideas in Russia in the 1880s and for whom the mystical strivings of Russian religious philosophy were alien, nonetheless similarly found in Scriabin’s creative works ‘his era, expressed in sound’.⁹ Berdīaev and Plekhanov’s opposing philosophical viewpoints found common ground in their image of Scriabin as embodying the key cultural strivings of his era.

Scriabin’s intellectual path meandered from youthful, Nietzschean musings through a grandiose solipsistic vision of his own status as a contemporary messiah and culminated in his final dream of bringing about the end of the world itself through the composition of his *Mystery*. This path has been well-documented, as have the wide-ranging sources underpinning Scriabin’s philosophical views (including Theosophy, Russian Symbolism, German idealism, and Russian religious philosophy) and their relation to his musical language.¹⁰ But why did Scriabin’s esoteric worldview, mystical strivings, and experimental musical language find such appeal amongst his contemporaries? To answer this question, this chapter first explores the concept of *theurgy* and the figure of the artist-theurgist in Silver Age Russia. Within this larger understanding of the place of art and the artist in human existence, Scriabin’s sudden and unexpected death from blood poisoning in 1915 was, perhaps inevitably, read as symbolic of a deeper truth. Mystical-leaning societies in Petrograd and Moscow devoted to Scriabin, his philosophy, and his music formed in the immediate aftermath of the composer’s death – the topic of section 2. These societies sought to codify a particular understanding of Scriabin’s significance, which, amid the context of war and revolution, came to be mapped onto questions of the fate of Russia itself. Fundamentally, the debates over Scriabin’s death were part of a larger discussion of artistic creation and its limits, and ultimately, the relationship between the individual and the cosmic. Did art truly have the power to transform reality? What were – or what should be – the boundaries between art and life? These debates, and the answers proposed to them, were central not only to Scriabin’s artistic world, but to Silver Age culture more broadly.

Theurgy, Magic, and the Task of the Poet

In their understanding of art, Silver Age poets and philosophers drew heavily on the Russian religious concepts of *theurgy*, *vseedinstvo* (‘all-unity’) and *sobornost’* (‘col-

⁹ Georgii Plekhanov, ‘Pis’mo k doktoru V. V. Bogorodskomu (May 9, 1916)’ in *Literatura i estetika* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1958), 2:117–20.

¹⁰ See for instance Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); Simon Nicholls and Michael Pushkin, eds. and trans., *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Rebecca Mitchell, *Nietzsche’s Orphans: Music and Metaphysics in Late Imperial Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Ralph E. Matlaw, ‘Scriabin and Russian Symbolism’, *Comparative Literature* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 1–23; Polina Dimova, ‘The Apocalyptic Dispersion of Light into Poetry and Music: Aleksandr Skryabin in the Russian Religious Imagination’, in *Shapes of Apocalypse: Arts and Philosophy in Slavic Thought* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 175–202; Malcolm Brown, ‘Scriabin and Russian “Mystic” Symbolism’, *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (July 1979): 42–51.

lectivity') popularised by religious philosopher Vladimir Solov'ëv. Solov'ëv's framing of artistic creativity was deeply coloured by his dualistic conception of spiritual (eternally perfect) and material (existing) reality, which he combined with Orthodox Christian theological concepts of 'incarnation' (*voploshchenie*) and 'transfiguration' (*preobrazhenie*). Art, for Solov'ëv, mirrored the Christian story of salvation: Christ's life and death signified the incarnation of an eternally perfect God in imperfect human form, an act that transfigured lower, material reality through the introduction of a higher, spiritual element. Art, which Solov'ëv considered to be the physical incarnation of Beauty in the material world, echoed this act of spiritual transfiguration of physical reality. For Solov'ëv, artistic theurgy thus referred to art's transfiguration (*preobrazhenie*) of material reality through its incarnation (*voploshchenie*) of Beauty, which itself was 'only the physical form of good and truth'.¹¹ Art, religion, and morality were thus intertwined in Solov'ëv's understanding of theurgy.

Underpinning Solov'ëv's metaphysics of art were the concepts of *vseedinstvo* and *sobornost'*. The end goal of artistic theurgy was to achieve 'positive or true *vseedinstvo*', a term coined by Solov'ëv to describe his conception of 'the cosmos as the manifestation of the divine absolute in the process of its own becoming or self-realization'.¹² For Solov'ëv, this metaphysical concept of 'all-unity' was key to his philosophical project of overcoming the one-sided materialism of earlier Russian thinkers. Solov'ëv firmly believed that only a philosophy that 'emphasized the whole person, as well as humanity's relationship to the material world and to God, would allow the full development of humanity'.¹³ The idea of *sobornost'* (*communality*) was borrowed both from the emphasis of earlier Slavophile philosophy on the collective (*sobornyi*) nature of Russian peasant life (which was viewed as an inherent aspect of Russian national character) and the translation of the Greek word *katholikos*, meaning 'universal' or 'whole', employed in the Nicene Creed to refer to the unity of the Christian faithful. Art, in its Silver Age interpretation, was thus a path through which the spiritualization of the material world would take place; *vseedinstvo* was the metaphysics through which the spiritual and physical sides of humanity were united; and *sobornost'* highlighted the communal rather than individual basis of the artistic (and spiritual) endeavour. For Solov'ëv's followers, this metaphysics spelled out a call to create art that not only represented a higher image of Beauty but actually brought about the transformation of the physical realm through the artistic embodiment of Beauty. Life was itself, in this view, a form of creation, and numerous

¹¹ Vladimir Solov'ëv, *Filosofîa iskusstva i literaturnâa kritika* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1991), 282.

¹² Randall A. Poole, 'Vladimir Solov'ëv's Philosophical Anthropology: Autonomy, Dignity, Perfectability', in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, ed. G. M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 131–49.

¹³ Rebecca Mitchell, "'Musical Metaphysics" in Late Imperial Russia', in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Randall Poole, Caryl Emerson, and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 379–95, here 383.

Symbolist artists embraced this idea of 'life-creation' (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) as their task.¹⁴ According to philosophers like Berdyaev, who sought to express these ideas in philosophical terms, the independent realm of art would vanish as art merged with religion, ushering in a new era of greater spirituality, an era of synthesis rather than differentiation.

The artist, destined to bring about the embodiment of spiritual Beauty in the physical realm, performed a deeply important role in Silver Age thought. Thus, Russian poet and Symbolist theorist Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), who was particularly close to Scriabin in the composer's final years, described the poet's creative path as climbing upward (*voskhozhdenie*) from 'lower reality' through Dionysian 'ecstatic exultation' to the heights of 'higher reality'. Here, having reached the limits of ecstasy, the poet experienced a vision of the ideal form of his artistic creation (which Ivanov referred to as the 'Apollonian dream') followed by spiritual quieting. This transcendence of lower reality was what transformed a mere human into an artist. However, this mystical experience in itself did not make an artist a theurgist (or 'god carrier' [*bogonoseŭs*]). To earn this higher title, the artist must voluntarily sacrifice this higher realm of the heavenly, bringing the appearance of the higher realm back to ordinary life. This return or lowering was, in Ivanov's view, a form of sacrifice wherein the artist voluntarily gave up the heavenly realm in a spiritual 'feat' (*podvig*) of self-denial for others. Through lowering himself back to ordinary reality, the theurgist showed the path upward to the rest of humanity. Moreover, this passage between higher and lower realms helped to transcend their duality and bring synthetic unity through spiritualizing the material world. In this act, art ceased to belong to the realm of aesthetics and became a religious phenomenon.¹⁵

Although this image of art as embodying movement from a lower to a higher realm, from multiplicity to unity, differentiation to synthesis, resonated with conceptual models that ranged from Theosophy to Christianity, Silver Age thinkers emphasized *human creativity* as the means for transcending divisions between material and spiritual realms. James West has suggested that this emphasis is already apparent in Solov'ev's thinking and probably derives from Christian theology; Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, with its emphasis on Dionysian unity and Zarathustra's superhuman nature is another possible source popular at the time, and Silver Age thinkers tended to read Nietzsche through a religious lens.¹⁶ Regardless of its source, the central role of the artist in the process of making the world divine was a key idea

¹⁴ Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Viacheslav Ivanov, 'O granitsakh iskusstva', *Trudy i dni*, no. 7 (1914): 81–106; VI. Vitort, 'Viacheslav Ivanov o granitsakh iskusstva', *Novoe zveno*, no. 6 (25 January 1914): 192–3. On Ivanov's interpretation of Scriabin within this tradition, see Pamela Davidson, 'Viacheslav Ivanov's Ideal of the Artist as Prophet: From Theory to Practice', *Europa Orientalis* 21 (2002): 157–202.

¹⁶ On the reception of Nietzsche in the Russian Silver Age, see Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); idem., *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans*.

shared by many Silver Age thinkers.¹⁷ Symbolically, this also found expression in the popularity of the mythical figure Orpheus – an artist who was able to transform reality through his art, even daring (albeit unsuccessfully) to pass from the earthly realm to the underworld in search of his beloved wife.

Two additional aspects of Orpheus are key to understanding Silver Age responses to Scriabin's death: his status as a poet-musician and the potential peril an artist faced in passing between lower and higher realms of reality. The Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean-inspired idea that music was the ultimate form of unity – unique among the arts for its direct embodiment of the inchoate Will underpinning reality – enjoyed great popularity within a society obsessed with a sense of crisis and potential disintegration. At the same time, Silver Age thought built upon Solov'ëv's insistence that morality was a necessary component of the creative genius.¹⁸ As Moscow musician and philosopher Konstantin Ėiges stressed, the composer alone did not simply feel 'the touch of another world', but also 'enters into this other world with his *entire soul* and contemplates the *transcendental* as a particular sound world-order in all its unearthly beauty'.¹⁹ Only the composer directly experienced the 'lower' mystical experience of the pure Dionysian state that he then transformed into the 'higher' mystical experience of a musical work.²⁰ The question lingered, however: what if the composer, like Orpheus in the underworld, proved unequal to the task?

Against the backdrop of a modernizing empire increasingly divided by social unrest and revolutionary impulses, the concept of artistic theurgy thus seemed to promise a means through which a better future could be assured. The artist-theurgist was capable of offering his audience higher spiritual insight, thereby, as Solov'ëv would argue, spiritualizing the material realm and perhaps even ushering in the next stage in human history. Many of Scriabin's contemporaries who took his project of the *Mystery* seriously during his lifetime seem to have understood its intent within this concept of artistic theurgy, with varying degrees of significance granted to Scriabin's own stated philosophy. For example, critic Eduard Stark breathlessly awaited Scriabin's promised work, writing for the journal *Novoe zveno* in 1914 that Russian society needed, not theatre, but 'a mystery, that will cleanse the soul of the listener with the light of god-bearing ideas. And the first among these is great love'.²¹ The composer's sudden death in 1915, at the height of his creative powers, thus left his admirers struggling to reconcile this apparently random fate with Scriabin's claim to be an artist-theurgist.

¹⁷ James West, 'Art as Cognition in Russian Neo-Kantianism', *Studies in East European Thought* 47, no. 3/4 (December 1995): 195–223.

¹⁸ Solov'ëv, *Filosofîia iskusstva*, 275.

¹⁹ Konstantin Ėiges, *Stat'i po filosofii muzyki* (Moscow: Tovarishchestvo tipografii A. I. Mamantova, 1912), 17–18.

²⁰ Ėiges, *Stat'i po filosofii muzyki*, 89–94.

²¹ Eduard Stark, 'Teatr-khram', *Novoe zveno*, no. 3 (4 January 1914): 90–1.

Scriabin as Symbol

'My Judgement is just, because I accomplish (*tvoriu*) not My own will, but the will of My Father who sent me ...'

*The greatest of our contemporaries, carrying amongst humanity the name of Aleksandr Nikolaevich Scriabin, has departed from earthly life.*²²

—Scriabin's Death Announcement, *Novoe zveno*, April 1915

From the moment of his death, Scriabin's fate was readily interpreted within a framework influenced by the apocalyptic strivings and theurgic images of the day. Amidst the turmoil of war and within a context where symbols were often viewed as providing a gateway to higher knowledge, the idea that such a 'trifle' as an infected carbuncle could cause the death of so great a creative spirit caused great consternation. Mythical and religious symbols provided a natural framing through which to make sense of this inexplicable mystery. Interpretations of Scriabin's death as a 'sacrifice' (*zhertva*) drew on both the image of Christ as the ultimate sacrifice for humanity and contemporary understandings of the artist-theurgist. In contrast, the framing of Scriabin's death as punishment built alternately on the image of Prometheus – Scriabin had dared to show humanity a glimpse of a higher world for which it was not ready – and Satanism – Scriabin's arrogant pride, individualism, or insufficient spiritual strength had led him astray. In keeping with the spirit of an age that sought to blur boundaries between art and reality, such mythological symbols could be readily merged. The Scriabin societies were formed to confront the problem of how to *correctly* decipher the deeper spiritual truth that it was believed must lie beneath the apparent randomness of fate.

The evening after Scriabin's death, the first posthumous society dedicated to Scriabin was formed – the 'Wreath of Scriabin' (*Venok Skriabina*). The immediate goals were modest: to financially provide for Scriabin's children from his second marriage and to collect articles, reminiscences, and poems dedicated to Scriabin for publication by the Moscow Symbolist press *Skorpion*. Two committees formed to prepare the text of the *Preparatory Act* and Scriabin's remaining musical compositions for publication.²³ In Moscow, weekly gatherings were accompanied by reading and discussion of the text of the *Preparatory Act*, and articles devoted to Scriabin's personality and creative work were solicited from musicians and writers acquainted with the late composer.²⁴ This impulse grew out of the intimate circle of friends and admirers who had gathered around Scriabin after his return to Russia in 1910. It included Scriabin's second (common-law) wife Tatiana, her brother, music critic and philosopher Boris Shlētser, former Marxist-turned-Theosophist doctor Vladimir

²² *Novoe zveno*, no. 15 (18 April 1915): 1.

²³ 'Ob'tavleniia Komiteta po sboru pozhertvovaniia v fond Venok A. N. Skriabinu', IRLI f.270, op.3, ed.khr.32.

²⁴ E. M. Braudo, 'Skriabinskii god', *Izvestiia Petrogradskogo skriabinskogo obshchestva*, no. 1 (1916): 10–16.

Bogorodskii, singer Aleksei Podgaetskii, Marina Gagarina and Vera Lermontova (sisters of the famed neo-idealist Moscow philosopher brothers Sergeï and Evgenii Trubetskoi), Symbolist poets Jurgis Baltrushaitis and Konstantin Bal'mont, and musicians Leonid Sabaneev and Nikolai Zhil'iaev. Outside this intimate circle, other members of Russia's Silver Age cultural elite involved in these early efforts included musicians Sergeï Rakhmaninov, Aleksandr Gol'denveizer, Evgenii Gunst, Aleksander Ziloti, music publisher Boris Jurgenson, piano manufacturer Andreï Diderikhs, and religious philosopher Sergeï Bulgakov.²⁵ However, the leading ideologues in interpreting Scriabin's significance were the poet Viacheslav Ivanov (whose views of theurgy were discussed in section 1) and Aleksandr Brianchaninov (1874–1956), Scriabin's close friend, journal editor, Anglophile, and Pan-Slavist ideologue.

Shattered by the unexpected loss of his friend and idol, Brianchaninov's initial reaction, expressed in his journal *Novoe zveno*, was to insist on the hidden significance this event held for Scriabin's contemporaries, arguing that 'it is clear that some sort of great shift in the spiritual world has taken place'.²⁶ But what significance did Scriabin's unexpected death hold? Was it a 'redeeming sacrifice'? Did it portend the 'victory of negative strength' that prevented humanity's ascent to a new level of spiritual insight? Or perhaps humanity had not been ready for the mystical insight that Scriabin offered?²⁷ Brianchaninov melded Christian and Greek imagery in his analysis, declaring, 'Scriabin was a prophet. He was Orpheus on the edge of a new epoch. He was, perhaps, that forerunner, whose head was mystically cut off at the moment when he proclaimed the path to new forms of salvation'.²⁸ The announcement of Scriabin's death that appeared in Brianchaninov's journal (quoted above) similarly demonstrates a blurring of boundaries between belief systems. Ostensibly based on the Gospel of John (5:30), the author – consciously or unconsciously – substituted the verb *tvorit'* (to 'create' or, in its secondary meaning, to 'bring about') for the verb *iskat'* (to 'search') that was used in the Russian Synodal translation.²⁹ With this substitution, the emphasis of the passage shifted from service to God's will to active participation in bringing it about.

Seeking answers to the 'mystical significance' of Scriabin's death, Brianchaninov hosted a varied gathering of experts at his Petrograd apartment on 28 April.³⁰ Two of these specialists – esotericist Piotr Uspenskii (1878–1947) and classicist Faddei Zelinskii (1859–1944) – had never been close acquaintances of Scriabin but potentially possessed the necessary credentials to offer an impartial diagnosis for

²⁵ 'Ob'iavleniia Komiteta', l.3. On Scriabin's 'inner circle', see Sabaneev, *Vospominaniia*; Olga Tompakova, A. N. *Skriabin i poety Serebr'iannogo veka* (Moscow: IRIS-Press, 1995); Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans*, 96–103.

²⁶ A. N. Brianchaninov, 'Pod penie Khristos Voskresel!' *Novoe zveno*, no. 15 (18 April 1915): 2–3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹ Russian Synodal Bible (1876).

³⁰ 'Mistiko-filosofskii otdel', *Novoe zveno*, no. 17 (2 May 1915): 8–11.

the messianic composer's death. Uspenskii was known as a specialist on the fourth dimension and tarot cards and later gained fame in emigration as an adept of Georgii Gurdzhiev's esoteric teachings on the 'Fourth Way'.³¹ Uspenskii's 1913 trip to the headquarters of the Theosophical movement in Adyar, India (cut short due to the outbreak of war), likely made his opinion particularly attractive since Brīanchaninov and Scriabin had begun to plan a similar journey together shortly before the composer's death.³² Absent any personal connection with the composer, Uspenskii interpreted Scriabin's mysterious demise through the 'dark' versus 'light' forces that govern human existence. His association of them, not with 'good' versus 'evil' but rather with 'active' versus 'inert' forces, echoed both Theosophical doctrine and Scriabin's own understanding of such concepts.³³ All prophets and mystics, Uspenskii claimed, sought to use their spiritual insight to overcome the inertness of the physical world through awakening active forces. Scriabin, weighed down by the general tendency of the world towards inertness, had proven too weak for this struggle. For Uspenskii, the most 'harrowing' aspect of the entire incident was not Scriabin's death (all humans are fated to die at a preordained time), but that Scriabin had not *foreseen* his imminent death. If Scriabin had possessed deep mystical insight, he would have expected his death and left behind a key to his *Mystery* that would allow its completion. Ultimately, Uspenskii concluded, the significance of Scriabin's death was the inspiration it offered to those left in this material realm to continue to struggle against the inertness of the world. While Scriabin had failed, it was very possible that a new prophet would arise, able to complete Scriabin's task and move humanity to a higher level of being. Indeed, Uspenskii saw the greatest hope for this development in the recurring accounts from participants of a feeling of lightness and joy that had descended upon them at Scriabin's funeral: in this, he saw potential inspiration to continue the spiritual struggle and complete Scriabin's unfinished task.³⁴

In contrast to Uspenskii's esotericist bent, Zelinskii was a professor of classical languages at St. Petersburg University, where he successfully awakened interest in ancient Greece as a source for a rebirth of Slavic culture that overcame the pedantic image of the classics decried by an earlier generation of Russian intellectuals.³⁵ In his analysis, Zelinskii considered three potential explanatory models for coping with tragic death. The first model, based upon a hope for life in the hereafter (the peace that derives from individual love of the person) was applicable only for those who had personally known Scriabin and did not address the question of his apparent failure to complete his mission. He similarly dismissed the second model, which

³¹ In 1909 Uspenskii published his first book, *The Fourth Dimension*, followed in 1912 by *Tertium Organum*. See Bob Hunter, *Ouspensky: Pioneer of the Fourth Way* (Utrecht: Eureka Books, 2000).

³² On the plans of Brīanchaninov and Scriabin to travel to India, see A. V. Kashperov, ed., *A. N. Skriabin: Pis'ma* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1965), 621–2; 630.

³³ Sabaneev, *Vospominaniia*, 120–3.

³⁴ P. D. Uspenskii, 'Mistiko-filosofskii otdel: Po povodu smerti A. N. Skriabina', *Novoe zveno*, no. 18 (9 May 1915): 2076–8; idem, *Novoe zveno*, no. 19 (16 May 1915): 2115–16.

³⁵ Peter I. Barta, David H. J. Larmour, and Paul Allen Miller, eds., *Russian Literature and the Classics* (Amsterdam: OPA, 1996), 8; 38; 104.

suggested that Scriabin was prevented from completing his task because humanity was not ready. Even if humanity was not ready, he reflected, the complete plan of Scriabin's *Mystery* could have waited in finished form for a future time. This left only his third model: that Scriabin's creative work would inspire his followers to continue his mission in this world.³⁶ He ended by quoting the final lines of a Schubert song – 'If God does not want to be on earth, we will become gods' – but added the query 'does [God] really not want this'? In this way, he suggested that God had intended that it was now humanity's task to take up the call for theurgic art and spiritualise this world through creative action. Though Scriabin had sensed this task, its fulfilment was left to others. Indeed, convinced by this narrative, Zelinskii became an active member of the Petrograd Scriabin Society.³⁷

While both Uspenskii and Zelinskii called for Scriabin's followers to continue his effort to spiritually transform life (whether in a Christian or esoteric key), Brianchaninov's third invited speaker – the late composer's brother-in-law – delivered a talk marked by deep ambiguity. Boris Shlētser began by emphasizing art's 'religious essence', which he saw in its ability to use the fleeting forms of the material world to accomplish a mystical act. The destructive physical power of sound waves served as his example for music's mystical power, though he suggested the possibility that 'organized and systematic energy of sounds can be used for constructive ends' as well. In brief, the physical and psychological effects of art in the physical realm were manifestations of the true effects of art in the higher realm. A work of art served as a link between higher and lower reality, an image in keeping with the concept of artistic theurgy espoused by Ivanov and others.

However, Shlētser went on to express uncertainty about Scriabin's fulfilment of this role. While he defined art as 'a magical incantation', it could be 'white' or 'black' in its effect. In addition to its potentially beneficial influence, art could also be 'destructive, corrupting, killing'.³⁸ Considering Scriabin's compositions, Shlētser recognised both the seventh sonata and *Prometheus* for their 'positive strength' and 'saintly, religious character', which (together with the Tenth Sonata) offered a 'preparatory, helping (*vspomogatel'nyi*) ritual'.³⁹ In contrast, solving the puzzle of Scriabin's death lay in understanding 'those causes that forced him, immediately after completing the victorious bright ritual of salvation [the Seventh Sonata], to suddenly call forth the devil [in the Ninth Sonata]'. Acknowledging the end of the ninth sonata to be a purported 'freeing' from the impure forces it conjured, Shlētser queried rhetorically, 'But did they truly disperse? Did they not stay there, close to him, these negative strengths, wounded, weakened, but still acting? Did they not negatively impact his body, his spirit, lowering their might, preparing in this way

³⁶ F. Zelinskii, 'Po povodu konchiny A. N. Skriabina', *Novoe zveno*, no. 20 (23 May 1915): 2145–6; idem., *Novoe zveno*, no. 21 (30 May 1915): 2174–5.

³⁷ 'Programmy zasedanii Petrogradskogo Skriabinskogo obshchestva', RGALI f.993, op.1, ed.khr.108, l.3.

³⁸ B. Shlētser, 'O deistvennom iskusstve (Smert' A. N. Skriabina)', *Novoe zveno*, no. 17 (69) (2 May 1915): 2040–3, here 2041–2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2042.

the final catastrophe'?⁴⁰ The remnants left behind by the composer, 'an almost finished text, musical fragments, and a lifeless body' left him undecided.⁴¹ Even while employing the language of salvific sacrifice to explain Scriabin's death, he remained unconvinced by this framing, asking in conclusion: 'Was Scriabin's undertaking in essence impossible in the earthly realm, or was Scriabin too weak, but the work is possible, in which case others will come and finish the Mystery? I can't answer this'.⁴² This uncertainty echoed a broader response in the periodical press of the day, which was filled with letters and analyses offering a wide range of possible interpretations of Scriabin's death, both positive and negative.⁴³

It was this uncertainty, voiced by Shlētser but felt by many, that the various Scriabin societies formed by Brīanchaninov and his like-minded colleagues sought to dispel. Indeed, the more positive interpretations by Uspenskiĭ and Zelinskiĭ won out over Shlētser's initial doubts. The Wreath of Scriabin met regularly in the weeks following Scriabin's death, and by the end of the summer, the committee had drafted a declaration of purpose. For Vīacheslav Ivanov, who served with Brīanchaninov as one of the key ideologues of the emerging societies, Scriabin's death mapped effectively onto his larger Symbolist project of myth-creation. The very name of the group, Wreath of Scriabin, both suggested the funereal practice of laying a wreath on the grave of the departed and echoed Ivanov's dedication of a cycle of sonnets to his deceased second wife (*Garland of Sonnets* [*Venok sonetov*]), an earlier example of Ivanov's retrospective mythologization of a dead companion.⁴⁴ Indeed, the earliest statements from the Wreath of Scriabin circle feature a mystically inclined interpretation of Scriabin's legacy that showed the clear mark of Ivanov's linguistic style, declaring that '[Scriabin] was a blazing light of spirit, a herald of new paths of consciousness, of new humanity'. Like Prometheus, Scriabin had dared too much: '[His] goal turned out to lay beyond the horizons of earthly existence and conceivable forms of human creation, and the design for which alone he lived, did not fit within the boundaries of life'.⁴⁵ As a result, 'his homeland', 'art' and the all those seeking spiritual transformation were 'orphaned'.⁴⁶ A similar sense of mission was expressed in Ivanov's unfinished sketches for the memorial volume, which focused on Scriabin's transcendence of the realm of art. Rather than the 'uncovering of the more real in the real', like other artists, mused Ivanov, Scriabin sought 'the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2042.

⁴¹ Ibid., 2042.

⁴² Ibid., 2043.

⁴³ On this broader discourse, see Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans*, 180–8.

⁴⁴ Robert Bird, *The Russian Prospero* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 21–5. In analysing Ivanov's response to Scriabin's death, Polina Dimova has termed Ivanov's commemorative writings a form of 'death creation'. See Dimova, 'Scriabin's Apocalyptic Dispersion of Light', 202. I am grateful to Polina Dimova for bringing this observation to my attention.

⁴⁵ 'Ob'tavleniia Komiteta', l.1.

⁴⁶ This phrasing echoes Ivanov's poem 'Pamiāti Skriabina', first read at a 14 May 1915 gathering at Gagarina's house. See Ivanov, 'Pamiāti Skriabina', *Muzyka*, no. 220 (26 April 1915): 289. The poem was first published in the paper *Novoe slovo*.

transformation of the real to the more real'.⁴⁷ This reframing of Scriabin's significance, built explicitly around the symbol of his death, resonated with a larger circle of followers.⁴⁸

Almost from the outset, there was a sense that the Wreath of Scriabin was too limited in scope to fully meet the mystic expectations that Scriabin's admirers spun around his name. The Scriabin societies that soon emerged in both Moscow and Petrograd had a more explicitly mystical tendency from the outset, though membership overlapped considerably with the Wreath of Scriabin. Brianchaninov announced the formation of the Petrograd Scriabin Society on 8 May 1915 at an evening concert dedicated to Scriabin's music organised by the Symbolist journal *Apollon*, though (due to bureaucratic delays) official government approval of the society was not received until March 1916.⁴⁹ A similar organization formed soon after in Moscow.⁵⁰ Society gatherings combined performance of Scriabin's music with papers on various facets of the composer's music, philosophy, and contemporary significance.⁵¹

Though early gatherings took seriously the task of defining the mystical significance of Scriabin's death, they allowed for some range of interpretations that incorporated commentary both on Scriabin's musical and philosophical significance. In Petrograd, music critics Viacheslav Karatygin and Evgenii Braudo offered relatively detailed explorations of Scriabin's musical language, while in a series of concerts in Petrograd, Moscow, and Kiev, pianist Aleksandr Gol'denveizer's thoughtful exploration of Scriabin's musical language and use of dissonance was paired with Ivanov's open celebration of the composer's mystical significance.⁵² In 1914 Ivanov had privately expressed skepticism over Scriabin's ability to complete his creative goals; he now declared Scriabin's death to be 'the completion of his personality', demonstrating his saintliness. Scriabin's life was 'one of the most important witnesses of that famous turning point taking place in the spiritual consciousness of contemporary

⁴⁷ Viacheslav Ivanov, 'Dva chteniã o Skriabine', IRLI f.607, no.178, ll. 60b–70b.

⁴⁸ Bird, *Russian Prospero*, 21–5; Dimova, 'Skriabin's Apocalyptic Dispersion of Light', 202.

⁴⁹ The first official general meeting of Petrograd Scriabin Society members took place on 13 April 1916, though unofficial gatherings were held throughout 1915. See *Ustav Petrogradskogo Skriabinskogo obshchestva* (Petrograd: Tovarishchestvo Galike i Vil'borgkh, 1916); 'Programmy zasedanii Petrogradskogo Skriabinskogo obshchestva', RGALI f.993, op.1, ed.khr.108; Braudo, 'Skriabinskii god', 15–16.

⁵⁰ The Moscow Scriabin Society officially formed on 13 January 1916. For a list of the elected leadership, see [No author], 'Khronika', *Muzyka*, no. 241 (16 January 1916): 43. For a list of meetings and concerts, see 'Obshchestvo imeni Skriabina. Izveshcheniã o zasedaniãkh i sobraniãkh 1916–1917', RGB f.746.38.39; Braudo, 'Skriabinskii god', 16.

⁵¹ This analysis considers public and private gatherings organised by the same figures active in the Scriabin societies throughout 1915 and early 1916 part of this larger history, though they could not officially be named as such.

⁵² A. B. Gol'denveizer, 'Skriabin i ego tvorchestvo', in A. B. *Gol'denveizer o muzykal'nom iskusstve* (Moscow: Muzyka, 1975), 127–32; 'Programmy zasedaniã Petrogradskogo Skriabinskogo obshchestva'; V. I. Ivanov, 'Vzgliad Skriabina na iskusstvo', RGALI f.225, op.1, ed.khr.32. Revised version published in Viacheslav Ivanov, *Skriabin* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi memorial'nyi muzei Skriabina, 1996), 5–37.

humanity', Ivanov opined. Not just Scriabin's accomplishments, but 'in no less measure, his ideas (*zamyshly*) that did not reach embodiment are a great event in the general life of the spirit', he concluded in December 1915.⁵³

In the months following the formation of the Scriabin societies, however, a codification of Scriabin's mystical significance took shape in keeping with the most extreme Silver Age ideas of artistic theurgy and simultaneously offered a more clearly developed commentary on how Scriabin's death helped to elucidate Russia's spiritual mission in the modern world. Thus, at a June 1915 meeting, the concern was raised that Scriabin's death signified, not the composer's failure, but the failure of Russia; a pessimistic claim that was rejected at subsequent meetings.⁵⁴ The founders of the Petrograd Scriabin Society began to gather regularly at Brianchaninov's apartment in October 1915 to flesh out the society's ultimate purpose, which they concluded 'must not be limited to purely musical tasks' but 'must be defined by the general world-creating ideas of [Scriabin's] testaments', the goal of which was 'humanity becoming a transformed, spiritualized being'.⁵⁵ The publication of reminiscences and the *Preparatory Act* were merely the beginning of a larger mission, which was (in keeping with the prescriptions Brianchaninov had received in his apartment meeting on 28 April) to continue the path to free creation that Scriabin had started.⁵⁶ As Brianchaninov concluded, 'Scriabin [...] is a prophetic phenomenon (*iavleniie*) of the future. [...] Scriabin has departed, but Scriabin's work remains. Scriabin has died, but Scriabin's task has, as it were, been born to a new life. Scriabin has fallen silent, but Scriabin's creations sound in us louder than during his life. [...] However great Scriabin was, he was, of course, limited. But unendingly deep and multifaceted is that idea, which he embodied amongst us'.⁵⁷ The Scriabin societies were to 'become a crucible of correct interpretation of Scriabin as an actual and prophetic symbol of the possible and imminent'.⁵⁸ Evolving together with an increasingly stringent anti-German wartime rhetoric, Scriabin quickly came to be framed as a fundamentally *Russian* theurgist, whose vision of *sobornost'* would defeat the German individualist spirit of the age – the root cause of the war. In this way, Russia itself would ultimately be victorious in both the lower, material realm of war, and the higher, spiritual realm where the modern, individual spirit would be replaced by *sobornost'*.⁵⁹

⁵³ Ivanov, 'Vzgliad Skriabina na iskusstvo', l.1. On Ivanov's disillusion with Scriabin in 1914, see Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans*, 182–4.

⁵⁴ [No author], 'Skriabin kak simvol', IRLI f.289, op.7, ed.khr.69, l.9.

⁵⁵ Braudo, 'Skriabinskiĭ god', 15.

⁵⁶ A. N. Brianchaninov, 'Neskol'ko slov o zadaniĭakh skriabinskiĭkh obshchestv', *Izvestiia Petrogradskogo skriabinskogo obshchestva*, no. 1 (1916): 1–9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ 'Skriabin kak simvol'. This analysis built on Scriabin's own interpretation of the war, offered in a letter written to Brianchaninov in 1914 and published in the latter's journal *Novoe zveno* and republished widely both during Scriabin's lifetime and after his death. On this shift amongst Russia's cultural elite in general, see Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans*, 164–80; Christopher Stoop, 'Nationalist War Commentary as Russian Religious

By the first anniversary of Scriabin's death, this narrative had triumphed within the Scriabin societies. At an evening lecture-concert hosted by the Moscow Scriabin Society, Shlētser emphasised Scriabin's creative evolution from the embrace of individualism to *vseedinstvo*, touting this as 'a sign for those searching for the true path'.⁶⁰ Ivanov emphasised Scriabin as a particular embodiment of Russian national character, after which Scriabin's music was performed by Sabaneev and Gol'denveizer.⁶¹ The audience included religious philosophers Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov, who would certainly have recognised both the nationalist and increasingly Orthodox Christian hue of the talks, not as an exact expression of Scriabin's ideas but as the continued development of a Russian messianic impulse present in their own philosophies. The Russian nationalist hue continued to grow in later speeches delivered under the auspices of the Scriabin societies. By 1916 Brianchaninov referred to the war as 'an external appearance of the beginning process of the freeing of humanity from the old out-lived forms of life experience, similar to the process of a snake shedding its skin'.⁶² Even analyses focused on Scriabin's music rather than his philosophy tended to be granted a spiritual interpretation, such as the mystical import Brianchaninov drew from music critic V. Karatygin's analysis of Scriabin's creative 'striving' (*dostiganie*) rather than 'accomplishment' (*dostizhenie*), seeing it as a metonym for Scriabin's spiritual path and the impossibility for its accomplishment in the lower, material world.⁶³

Within this atmosphere of mystical veneration, Leonid Sabaneev's 1916 book, *Skriabin*, fell like a bombshell. One of Scriabin's closest friends and ardent supporters, Sabaneev's career as a music critic had been devoted to propagandizing Scriabin's music and ideas. As the secretary of the Moscow Scriabin Society, his new book was featured at their April 1916 concert. However, initial enthusiasm from his colleagues quickly turned to scorn once the contents of the book became known.⁶⁴ The Petrograd Scriabin Society gathered on 21 May to discuss the errors of Sabaneev's book, with speeches from local members and recitation of letters from the Moscow Society.⁶⁵ Sabaneev – argued his critics – failed to appreciate the 'child-like' soul of

Thought: The Religious Intelligentsia's Politics of Providentialism', *Russian Review* 72 (January 2013): 94–115.

⁶⁰ B. Shlētser, 'Ot individualizma k vseedinstvu', *Apollon*, no. 4–5 (April–May 1916): 48–63, here 48–9.

⁶¹ 'Obshchestvo imeni Skriabina. Izveshcheniia o zasedaniakh i sobraniakh 1916–1917', RGB f. 746.38.39; Shlētser, 'Ot individualizma k vseedinstvu'; V. Ivanov, 'Skriabin, kak natsional'nyi kompozitor', RGALI f.225, op.1, ed.khr.33. For Ivanov's revised speech, published as 'Natsional'noe i vselenskoe v tvorchestve Skriabina', see Ivanov, *Skriabin*.

⁶² Brianchaninov, 'Neskol'ko slov'.

⁶³ 'Kontserty v Petrograde', *RMG* (1916): 986–7.

⁶⁴ Sabaneev, *Skriabin* (Moscow: Skorpion, 1916). The most controversial section of Sabaneev's book, 'The Orphic Path' (68–84), does not appear in the 1916 table of contents. Thus, someone casually leafing through the book at the evening concert would not have immediately had his or her attention drawn to this section.

⁶⁵ 'Programmy zasedaniia Petrogradskogo Skriabinskogo obshchestva', RGALI f.993, op.1, ed.khr.108, l.5–6; *Izvestiia Petrogradskogo skriabinskogo obshchestva*, no. 2 (1917).

Scriabin, falsely accused Scriabin of extreme individualism by claiming the composer had envisioned himself alone as the creator of the final *Mystery* (his supporters insisted that Scriabin had repeatedly referred to it as a *collective* act), and contradicted his own earlier judgements of Scriabin's symphonic ability and harmonic language. Most offensive to Scriabin's mystically inclined admirers, however, was Sabaneev's deprecation of Scriabin's 'Orphic path' – the idea that 'religion and art are a single sphere, a single field, and that art in its physical form is a path to active religious initiation'.⁶⁶ Although Scriabin had set off on the path of an 'active theurgist', Sabaneev concluded that Scriabin's love of 'anxious moods' and 'the cult of sin and diabolical, bewitching depravity' led him away from the true mystical path.⁶⁷

Perhaps most shocking was that Sabaneev's attack rejected not just Scriabin but the very *idea* of artistic theurgy. Freely mixing Christian and esoteric terminology, Sabaneev concluded that, as an artist, Scriabin simply could not truly be a theurgist. In the end, 'his life awaited its own Golgotha', and certainly not one which could redeem humanity. The Orphic (or theurgic) path led Scriabin 'to that end, to which [theurgy] leads everyone, because this path is not the Path to Light'. This was because, Sabaneev asserted, art itself 'cannot offer a path to mystical consciousness, because too many threads connect art with the lower planes, with the sensual and with the astral [planes]'. Art was capable only of reflecting the 'shadows of higher planes', not providing direct access to them.⁶⁸ Weighed down by its association with the lower, material world, art could only access the middle astral plane between higher and lower realms, barred from genuine mystical insights into the highest level of spirit. At the same time, the pride of the individual artist, falsely believing in his ability to transfigure the world through his art, threatened to lead him down the path of 'satanism', which Sabaneev associated not with the Christian understanding of Satan as the embodiment of sin and deception but with individual aggrandisement and fascination with the lower, material realm of existence.

The publication of Sabaneev's book prompted not just sharp condemnation but also attempts by the Moscow and Petrograd Scriabin Societies to exonerate the composer. Repeatedly excoriating Sabaneev's betrayal for the threat it posed to the composer's spiritual legacy, Scriabin's supporters emphasised that the composer had not suffered from mental illness, had not considered himself spiritually prepared to compose the *Mystery*, and had not seen himself alone as the bringer of transformation. Rather, as Ivanov stressed, Scriabin believed that such an act would occur outside of himself and required a communal (*sobornyi*) spirit among all participants.⁶⁹ Nor, argued his supporters, did Scriabin demonstrate any particular tenderness for 'dark forces'. According to Vladimir Nosenkov, Scriabin's impact on listeners was fundamentally positive, awakening a thirst for religion and light, a 'striving to god',

⁶⁶ Sabaneev, *Skriabin*, 68.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 69–71.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 76–8.

⁶⁹ Ivanov, 'Pis'mo chlena soveta M.S.O. V. I. Ivanova predsedatelju Petrogradskogo Skriabinskogo Obschestva po povody knigi L. L. Sabaneeva "Skriabin"', *Izvestiia Petrogradskogo skriabinskogo obschestva*, no. 2 (1917): 16–21, here 20.

rather than an enthusiasm for darkness. As Nosenkov concluded rhetorically, 'How could a Messiah of the devil turn even one person to God'?⁷⁰ V. Lermontova and M. Gagarina rhetorically accused Sabaneev of harbouring a personal sympathy for Satanism. But it was Ivanov who summarised the central opposition of the Scriabin societies most concisely: Sabaneev accused not just Scriabin, but all theurgy, of satanism. Vitriol dripped from Ivanov's concluding remark that Sabaneev 'would probably remain of this particular opinion even if the ancient Christian martyrs arose from the catacombs and witnessed before him that Orpheus is truly a symbol of Christ'.⁷¹

It was Shlētser who offered the most developed defence, not only of Scriabin's claim to the title of theurgist, but of theurgy itself. Conveniently forgetting his own doubts from the previous year, Shlētser took a two-pronged approach to rejecting Sabaneev's analysis. First, he shifted the demonic impact of a work of art like Scriabin's Ninth Sonata from the creator to the listener, arguing that such works 'are able to trouble our souls only because we don't have strength, because of our weakness, our human imperfection, to rise to the level of contemplation, to the aesthetic experience the artistic content gives to us'. Then, drawing on Solov'ev's association of art as a means through which to spiritualise the physical world, he argued that Scriabin, like Wagner and Liszt before him, 'introduced content into the Kingdom of Beauty [i.e., art] that had previously been experienced by humanity only in reality and as such, could be negatively judged'. This introduction of new 'feelings and desires' from reality into art constituted an act of 'cleansing' (or, in Solov'ev's terms, spiritualization).⁷² Shlētser concluded that concepts like 'sick', 'harmful', or 'immoral' art were meaningless, expressing only the low level of contemporary artistic culture in Russia. Art, by definition, could only be a form of white magic, because of its connection with Beauty. In other words, the Good was equivalent to the Beautiful, and art was (following Solov'ev's definition) the physical depiction of the Beautiful. The introduction of new feelings and sensations into art was part of the process of spiritualization of the physical world, and Scriabin's Ninth Sonata, which had so troubled Shlētser just the previous year, was now framed explicitly as an act of spiritualization and cleansing.

Doubts about theurgy grew amongst Russian intellectuals, however. Without passing judgement on the controversy Sabaneev had unleashed about Scriabin himself, philosopher S. Bulgakov focused instead on its philosophical significance. Writing in the philosophical journal *Russkaia mysl'*, he attacked, not Scriabin's followers, but Solov'ev's own incautious use of the word 'theurgic' in relation to art. In his conception of theurgic art, Solov'ev had 'sent spiritual strivings on a false path, and now we must again return them to the starting point, and first of all pose the principal question: is it possible to speak of theurgy, of Godly action, in relation to human creativity?' Bulgakov's answer to this question was negative. The action

⁷⁰ V. L. Nosenkov, 'Otzyv chlena soveta M.S.O.', *Izvestiia Petrogradskogo skriabinskogo obshchestva*, no. 2 (1917): 9–10.

⁷¹ Ivanov, 'Pis'mo chlena soveta', 20.

⁷² B. Shlētser, 'Orficheskie puti', *Izvestiia Petrogradskogo skriabinskogo obshchestva*, no. 2 (1917): 25–9, here 27–8.

of God in the world, completed by humanity and through humanity, must be differentiated from human striving towards the realm of God. Only the first was true theurgy and found embodiment in acts such as the Eucharist, in which a human agent, through God's transformative power, enacted a mystery in the physical world – the transformation of wine and bread to the blood and body of Christ. In contrast, human creative action was best defined as either 'anthropourgy', or 'sofiurgy'. The latter referenced Bulgakov's concept of Sofia, whose emanation from God gave rise to the physical universe and provided the potential spiritual basis for the ultimate salvation of the world. 'Theurgy' was God's descent to the earth, while 'anthropourgy' was human striving towards the heavens. Both existed, but the fatal error in contemporary thought was the melding of the two. The debates over Scriabin provided, Bulgakov concluded, a perfect embodiment of the danger of such melding. If one understood Scriabin's idea of the Mystery as an artistic dream, it was a symbolic representation of this sofiurgic striving for heaven, unachievable in earthly life. His untimely death was, in this view, the natural consummation of this striving, which could only be achieved in the heavenly realm. By contrast, if one viewed his *Mystery* as a genuine 'project' for a completed work of art and assigned the artist the role of theurgist, this was the confusion between theurgy and sofiurgy so typical of the age, the seduction of false messianism that led, not to Godmanhood (*bogochelovechestvo*) as Solov'ëv envisioned, but to Mangodhood (*chelovekobozhie*) and Luciferism.⁷³ Such an analysis returned a negative answer to a question posed at a 1915 Scriabin Society meeting: not only was Russian society *not* ready for Scriabin's task of spiritual transformation, but the very idea of artistic theurgy that held such a key place in Silver Age thought was itself a symptom of the *failure* of Russian culture to live up to its spiritual task.

The Scriabin societies' philosophical sparring over artistic theurgy laid bare the fault lines within Silver Age culture that fostered Scriabin's extraordinary philosophical dreams and music. A theosophical understanding of 'light' and 'dark' forces, still present in Uspenskiĭ's early analysis of Scriabin's death and apparent in Scriabin's extant philosophical descriptions, was overwritten – but not erased – by a discourse centred on artistic theurgy and the question of Russia's spiritual destiny. Though synthesis – of the arts, of different realms of human knowledge – was a key value of the age, and one proudly trumpeted by the Scriabin societies, in practice, the societies fostered division rather than unity. Moscow music critic Gr. Prokofiev noted both the exclusionary nature of the Moscow Scriabin Society, and its tone, which was set 'not by musicians, but by philosophers and writers'. After attending the April 1916 gathering, he concluded that 'the meeting of the Scriabin Society is full of words, words, and words, sometimes beautiful (Viacheslav Ivanov), sometimes touching (Baltrushaitis and Bogorodskii), sometimes monotonous (Shlëtser), but mostly – unnecessary'.⁷⁴ The granting of 'honored member' status to supporters of a mystical reading of Scriabin's significance while requiring musical colleagues to petition for 'regular membership' (and to pay the membership fee of 10 rubles per

⁷³ S. Bulgakov, 'Iskusstvo i teurgiiā: Fragment', *Russkaia mysl'*, no. 12 (1916): 1–24.

⁷⁴ Gr. Pr., 'Moskovskie kontserty', *RMG*, no. 18–19 (1916): 435–6.

year with an additional 5 rubles to join) was too condescending for famed music contemporaries like Sergeĭ Rakhmaninov, Nikolai Medtner, or impresario Sergeĭ Kusevitskii to accept. Indeed, Nikolai Medtner was so disgusted by the April 1916 event, where speakers including Baltrushaitis and Shlētser ‘poured unending philosophical terms on a single note’, that he stormed out without hearing the musical portion.⁷⁵ This alienation led Medtner to decline a personal request from Scriabin’s wife Tatiana in September 1916 to participate in future Scriabin society concerts.⁷⁶ Gol’denveĭzer, who continued to promote Scriabin’s music, resigned from the Moscow Scriabin Society leadership in 1917, stating in a letter to Gagarina that ‘he disagreed with the activities of the leadership’.⁷⁷ A 1917 pamphlet responding to the debate concluded simply that Scriabin was in need of salvation from his own mystical admirers.⁷⁸ Attempts by the society to employ Scriabin’s *Preparatory Act* as a starting point for further artistic inspiration and synthesis met with failure, even from those who acknowledged that the mystical, theurgic goals of the composer were similar to their own. Responding to Brīanchaninov’s request for his opinion of the *Preparatory Act* text, Symbolist poet Maksimilian Voloshin found the text to be primitive and unworthy of publication as a work of poetry, even though the ‘forms and ideas expressed [in the *Preparatory Act*] are familiar and close to me’.⁷⁹ While living, Scriabin had succeeded in uniting a wide swathe of educated society in discussion of music’s significance in the contemporary world. With his death, factionalism quickly intervened.

Despite their increasing isolation, the Scriabin societies continued to tout the relationship between Scriabin’s task and current events. The 18 March 1917 Petrograd Scriabin Society concert, held shortly after the February 1917 revolution had toppled the Romanov dynasty, featured talks on the theme of Scriabin as a revolutionary. Zelinskii drew direct parallels between Scriabin’s ‘idea of *sobornost*’ and ‘that *sobornost*’, which brought forth the grandiose social transformation (*perevorot*), of which we are all witnesses’. In their papers, both Brīanchaninov (‘Scriabin as Revolutionary’) and Speranskii (‘Art of Sounds and World Revolution’) emphasised Scriabin’s revolutionary strivings and belief in his messianism through drawing parallels between the composer, Nietzsche, and Rousseau.⁸⁰ In May 1917, responding to the revolutionary fervour of the age, Brīanchaninov petitioned the inveterate

⁷⁵ Anna to Emil Medtner (7–14 April 1916); idem (16–20 April 1916), Library of Congress Medtner collection.

⁷⁶ Anna to Emil Medtner (13–18 September 1916), Library of Congress Medtner collection. On the alienation of leading Russian musicians, see also Sabaneev, *Vospominaniia*, 317.

⁷⁷ A. S. Skriabin, A. Iu. Nikolaeva, and P. A. Shatskii, ‘A. B. Gol’denveĭzer i Muzei A. N. Skriabina’ in *Nastavnik: Aleksandr Gol’denveĭzer glazami sovremennikov* (Moscow: Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ Universitetskaiā kniga, 2014), 446–54.

⁷⁸ D. S. Shilkin, *Iskusstvo i mistika: K družiam A. N. Skriabina* (Petrograd: Tipografiia Zheleznodorozhnykh izdaniĭ, 1916).

⁷⁹ Maksimilian Voloshin to Aleksandr Nikolaevich [Brīanchaninov], RGALI f.102, op.1, ed.khr.10.

⁸⁰ Poet F. Sologub’s speech that evening, ‘Mechty preobrazheniā’, focused on the question of artistic theurgy, interpreting Scriabin within this quest for life-transformation. See T.,

Marxist Plekhanov to join the Scriabin society.⁸¹ Pondering Scriabin's significance on the very eve of the Bolshevik overthrow of the Provisional Government at a gathering of the Moscow Scriabin Society, poets Bal'mont and Ivanov continued this analysis of the revolutionary meaning of Scriabin.⁸² Ivanov framed Scriabin as a revolutionary forerunner of the 'much-suffering and painful birth of the "independent Russian idea"'. Scriabin, he hinted, might well have laid the groundwork for the great spiritual awakening that Russia was destined to bring to humanity, and perhaps 'the future historian will see [...] in the revolution itself] the first measures of his unfinished *Mystery*'. Such an outcome, he hurried to add, would be possible only if, out of the chaos of revolution, the 'spirit of God' was also visible in action – a hope that he would see dashed by subsequent historical developments.⁸³

Conclusion

Looking back on the heady artistic dreams and spiritual striving of the Silver Age, Soviet writer Boris Pasternak dubbed the entire epoch 'the era of Scriabin'.⁸⁴ The revolutionary wave of 1917 swept away the era so deeply influenced by the legacies of a single composer, but its concepts and values lingered on in nostalgic memory. The text of the *Preparatory Act* and Scriabin's philosophical notebooks were published with accompanying text by Shlētser in 1919, two years after the circles that so hotly debated their contemporary significance and breathlessly awaited their appearance had vanished. As Ivanov prepared his Scriabin Society papers for publication in 1919, he was left to acknowledge both the outdated quality of his ideas and the inherent value of publishing ideas born in historical times for the insight they would provide to future generations.⁸⁵

In his 1925 *Reminiscences of Scriabin*, Sabaneev commented ironically with regard to the Scriabin societies that 'all these mystics turned out to be passionate believers in Scriabin's *Mystery* namely then, when he no longer lived and when there was nothing to hope for'.⁸⁶ Like much of Sabaneev's analysis, this claim was simultaneously insightful and inaccurate. The Scriabin societies did not foster belief in Scriabin's *Mystery* as the composer had envisioned it. However, they did foster a particular understanding of art, society, and the 'Russian Idea' – the idea that Russia had a special, spiritual task to save contemporary humanity through the reawakening of the collective, religious spirit of humanity. While contemporaries had mixed responses to the societies' mystical views of Scriabin, the language in which they

'Khronika: Opera i kontserty v Petrograde', *RMG*, no. 13–14 (1–8 April 1917), 299–301; E. Levashev, ed., *Istoriia russkoi muzyki*, vol. 10B, 1890–1917, Bk 1 (Khronograf, 2017): 963.

⁸¹ Plekhanov, *Literatura i estetika*.

⁸² 'Obshchestvo imeni Skriabina', l.4. Bal'mont's speech was titled 'Revoliutsionizm Skriabina'.

⁸³ Ivanov, 'Skriabin i dukh revolutsii', in Ivanov, *Skriabin*, 71–2.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Matlaw, 'Scriabin and Russian Symbolism', 1.

⁸⁵ Ivanov, *Skriabin*, 3–4.

⁸⁶ Sabaneev, *Vospominaniia*, 316.

were framed was comprehensible to them. Silver Age culture posited an image of artistic theurgy as an immanent task, one whose purpose was reaffirmed by many in the experience of the Great War. The societies' merging of artistic theurgy with an evolving image of Russian messianism represented a broader nationalist trend in Silver Age culture. Scriabin's life, death, and creative work thus served as a symbol through which questions of the relationship between art, life, morality, and the historic task of Russia were posed.