

ANATOLY LUNACHARSKY: “ON SCRIBIN”

*(Commentary by Don Louis Wetzel,
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Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky (1875-1933), the Russian communist philosopher and writer, may be credited with having helped to save and preserve his country's cultural legacy from threatening destruction during a period of great political unrest and fanaticism. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the political and spiritual leader of the Russian Communist Movement, Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), installed the trusted revolutionary as head of the Commissariat of Education and Enlightenment (NARKOMPROS), a position he would hold until 1929. In this capacity, Lunacharsky developed a relatively liberal policy. Acting with prudence and acumen, he presented himself as a mediating figure between various extremist factions and prevented a complete hiatus with past cultural achievements of the so-called *intelligentsia* of Tsarist Russia. Although promoting a society based on proletarian dogma, Lunacharsky was himself a product of this privileged class of intellectuals.

A highly cultivated man who had studied in Kiev and abroad in Zurich, Lunacharsky appreciated the arts. His affinity for classical music and composers led him to write extensively on these topics. His thoughts in pursuit of a utopian ideal based on collective humanity as well as his appreciation of religious mysticism place him very much in alignment with the positions of Alexander Scriabin and other contemporaneous artists and literary exponents of symbolism. He sought to incorporate positive aspects of the former bourgeois *intelligentsia* into the new social order, to balance rationalism and emotionalism.¹ Under the authority and leadership of Lunacharsky, a modernist, progressive atmosphere predominated, which was to remain outside the realm of political influence throughout his tenure as commissar. This was reinforced by the liberal platform inaugurated in 1921 under the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP), which would last until 1928. During this period, Lunacharsky fostered an active inter-European cultural exchange, especially with Germans, whom he claimed at that time to be the “most sensitively cultured of peoples.”² In advocating this, it was

¹ See Timothy Edward O'Conner, *The Politics of Soviet Culture, Anatolii Lunacharskii* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983).

² From a speech given in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory on October 29, 1922, marking the fortieth anniversary of Alexander Glazunov's compositional activity and his nomination as fellow to the Berlin Academy. Reprinted in *V Mire Muzyki* (Moscow: *Sovietski Kompozitor*, 1958), 98-105.

Lunacharsky's goal to maintain Russia and her artistic heritage within a broader all-European context.

In 1958, the state publishing house for music of the former USSR, *Sovietski Kompositor*, dedicated a volume to the works of Anatoly Lunacharsky entitled *V Mire Muzyki* (In the World of Music) reproducing his numerous writings on music. It is from this collection that the following article, "On Scriabin," has been extracted and translated. The article originally appeared in the journal *Kultura Teatra* on May 20, 1921. The article had its origin as a speech given on May 8, 1921 that Lunacharsky had delivered in Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre on the occasion of a cycle of concerts dedicated to the symphonic works of Alexander Scriabin under the direction of Emil Albertovich Cooper (Russian conductor, born in Kherson, 1877, died in New York, 1960). In his speech, Lunacharsky draws comparisons between the ideas of Scriabin and those of three great German minds of the nineteenth century—Beethoven, Schopenhauer, and Wagner. He describes Scriabin as an optimist whose struggle toward utopian ideals for mankind is very similar to the struggle of the Russian Communist Movement towards a more perfect society. For Lunacharsky, Scriabin was a revolutionary whose music and the philosophy he sought to express through it placed the composer ahead of his time.



Portrait of Anatoly Lunacharsky by Leonid Pasternak

ON SCRIBIN

by Anatoly Lunacharsky, Kultura Teatra no. 66 (1921)

(Translation by Don Louis Wetzel)

Comrades and citizens! Throughout this year, I have appeared several times in this theatre with introductory words to talk about a number of great musicians. I agreed with pleasure to the request of the organizer of these concerts to say a few words at this first one dedicated to the works of Scriabin, especially since quite by chance there is a common element unifying the series in its basic purpose. Personally, I have always had a special interest in those aspects of musical creativity that may be called poetical and philosophical. The musical creative work is first and foremost poetry in that profound sense to which points the very etymology of this word. This is *creativity*, and human creativity has always existed and will continue to exist through the revelation of the human personality and human spirit in general. From this point of view, every true musician and outstanding composer is a poet. And every musical composition is, of course, a work of poetry—and to some degree philosophical—in the sense that it is reacting to greater feelings more or less related to a man's thoughts about the world. We are all quite aware that philosophy by itself is not only observation and analysis of what has been examined according to the laws of logic; it is also the intuitive perception of the world. The majority of philosophers are poets who wrote their poems about the world.

However, in music it is possible to draw a line, on one side of which there can be found so-called pure [absolute] music, where the author sets an exclusively acoustical, tonal goal and thinks less about re-creating some kind of feeling. On the other side, there will be a music saturated by mood, feeling, passion, and sometimes by that which can be called an *idea*—if we understand this word not in the sense of an expressed concept, but rather as something intuitively sensed; it is an approach, perception, or experience not corresponding to any kind of concrete human emotion, but presenting a reflection in this emotion of the whole world or of some colossal world phenomenon.

All the musicians whom I have discussed belong to the poets and philosophers of music. I even referred to some respected European critics in order to emphasize that this opinion is more or less generally accepted.

Undoubtedly, Beethoven himself estimated his work in this way. Nobody denies, as we have discussed before in this series of symphonic and chamber concerts, that a special redemptive ethic of great importance and depth is inherent in Beethoven.

In this series, we have also had presented such musicians as Berlioz and Strauss. These musicians appear in programs as poets; their music has an absolutely precise content. They wrote musical poems sometimes directly corresponding

to words. One of them was a top poet-musician of Romanticism; the other was one of Modernism.

I also had an opportunity to talk about Wagner. He, undoubtedly, was just as much a poet as he was a musician. In his works, the orchestral part is accompanied by dramatic action, which in Nietzsche's opinion is a concrete example [of this duality]. It is a separate embodiment of those common phenomena of a metaphysical character, one which corresponds to a well-known concept about the destiny of the world, which Wagner depicts in his orchestra.

Scriabin was a poet, philosopher, and musician. In this respect, there exists between him and Wagner an extremely important link. I am not going to talk about Scriabin as a musician in the strict sense of this word, or about the role he may have played in the expansion of boundaries that were seen as musically permissible. This link to the innovation of Wagner interests me less here. I am interested in the fact that Wagner totally shared Schopenhauer's view of the world [Weltsanschauung], that pessimistic pantheism, which in both Schopenhauer and Wagner corresponded then to the prevailing social emotional experience. Scriabin was initially also a pessimist as well as a pantheist. However, if the pantheistic experiences of Scriabin almost coincide with Schopenhauer's ideas, then later his pessimism transforms itself gradually into exultant optimism. I am insufficiently familiar with the inner world of Scriabin and I cannot assert that Nietzsche had a great influence upon Scriabin, but I think that he read him, or was in an atmosphere in which Nietzschean emanations could not help but affect his life.

I will very briefly formulate how Schopenhauer views the world. It is for him a stream of the "will." It is blind and senseless; it torments itself, smashing itself into separate waves and entities, which mutually break the principle of each individual part so that chaos is created. At the foundation of the world, which is chaos, which is suffering, lies the single "will." But, it came to be split up through its fatuity and blindness, and by its deaf passion. Schopenhauer, though, did not allow this pessimism to remain hopeless; he said that mankind could take leave of this world to enter Nirvana. But, as soon as these or those parts of the "will" escape from this chaos and become harmonized, they arrive in a state without conflict; as soon as they attain it, they exceed the boundary of their existence. This is the end of the "will." Therefore, this is Buddhism expressed quite clearly in modern language.

Let's see how Scriabin views the world. Recently, his notes and a remarkable poem containing the entire literary part of the so-called "Prefatory Act" were published in the latest book of "Russian Propylaea."¹ With this work, he replaced his grand idea of the "Mysterium," about which I will have to say a few words.

So just how did Scriabin view the world? With almost pedantic scrupulousness, he endeavored to approach that mysterious perception of the world taking more and more possession of his soul, which he as a poet and musician fancied. The world revealed itself to him through creativity of the spirit. As with Wagner, it is the spirit that *thirsts* for adventure. It is exactly through all kinds of emotional experience that the "will"

¹ The "Russian Propylaea" were a series of books introduced in 1915 by the Sabashnikov Publishing House in Moscow (est.1891). They presented never before published materials on the history of Russian thought and literature.

creates a world. For its very sake, the world disintegrates into billions of pieces, into innumerable sorts of nuances. For its sake, grief, feebleness, and passions are created. The spirit succumbs to the whole scale of self-torment and does so with just the same voluptuousness with which it succumbs to pleasure. At one moment, it falls into an abyss; at another, it attempts to scale high peaks. There exists some kind of large game of ascents and descents. And, in order to take this game seriously, so that the spirit may enter into its role, it is necessary that it forget its divinity and its wholeness and that it vanish into a billion masses in which it exists and in which we observe its existence.

This is exactly what is contained in Schopenhauer. Only, Schopenhauer says, “all this is great unhappiness and horror, something from which one needs to escape.” And Scriabin says, “it is wonderful; it is fascinating; for I sense with my entire heart that I am one from among the offspring of the complete spirit. I understand why the spirit wanted this and why it broke into these suffering existences; and I bless it.”

Scriabin pictured some gigantic pulsation that was transpiring in the spheres of the spirit, sometimes breaking into fragments, sometimes gathering into a single focal point and discovering its existence. This is not the absence of life—peaceful Nirvana—but rather a resurrection of the omnipotent in which each individual “I” receives respite. Then, rest bores and wearies the spirit that no longer wants to remain in this condition. The spirit disturbs its equilibrium and, once again, a period of existence begins.

This is, in general, how Scriabin himself views the world. This is why he says that music is the art that is capable of expressing this world in its essence. In other words, it expresses directly its inner condition—a thirst to suffer, a thirst to take pleasure, a thirst for struggle and for life. No other art form besides music is able to express with such infinite diversity what appears to be the genuine essence of the world.

But there were moments of great inner confusion and temptation in the soul of this amazing person. During one phase of his spiritual development, it seemed to us all—the majority of whom were not more intimately acquainted with him in his later years—that in the *last* phase of his mission, he, Scriabin, had arrived at an idea we could call paradoxical or even insane. On the one side, this lunacy is expressed in the fact that he began to confuse the “will” of the spirit with his own soul and began to say, “You, any brother of mine, are not the spirit; but only I am the spirit, I, Scriabin, and only I alone. All the rest is my creation, and you cannot take me away from it through any philosophical argument. I feel only what I feel. Consequently, the whole world is within me and all people are within me. They are a moment of my existence. I represent all the diversity of the world. And you—my suffering brother coming to my concerts—you are nothing else other than the essence living through me and thanks to me, Scriabin. And, I, myself, am something like the true expression of the god-spirit. I exist in the world in order to permit the world to enter Nirvana. And, I will achieve it through music. I will transform the world into music. I will melt the world into music. I will create just such a ‘Mysterium,’ which, continuing for several days with breath-taking ceremonies and accompanied by unprecedented music, will force all human souls to pour into mine and to realize their union with me. This will become the return of the worlds to the bosom of peace and harmony—the bosom of Pan.”

Of course, the strangeness of these ideas immediately becomes apparent. This is a pathological perversion. This is already megalomania. This is a mad idea.

But, if this is a mad idea, an even madder idea is that of the “Mysterium,” which by no means is merely a simple concert somewhere in the world, such as in Paris or wherever else it might be performed. After this event, the whole world shall change.

And, here, we strangers who have little to do with Scriabin and who are not close to him see the following picture. The ingenious musician and powerful poet places before himself an unattainable task. Through a false overestimation of his endlessly rich life on the path of its diffusion throughout the whole world—thanks to a brilliant sensitivity, with which he feels everything that happens with the sea, the stars, the people, the wild animals and so forth—he expands the concept of his soul to a concept of the whole world. He thinks that what transpires in his soul is a world event; it is a law, which is binding for all worlds.

At this moment, the person who has touched the skies with his head and in his own imagination sees himself as a demiurge that created the universe now prepares to destroy it as if he were a god, to whom the world belongs. Then, however, at this moment of arrogance—one of the most splendid and awe-inspiring pictures of self-praise—an insignificant event, that of a simple scratch, turns everything around and results in death. The person, whom we objectively recognize as a genius and the hope of Russian music and who considers himself the creator, ruler, and redeemer of the world, perishes because of an incidental trifle in the most pathetic way.²

The tragedy of it is so great that our thought unwittingly runs into the idea that some kind of power may have intervened here. Which of the ancient myths could you compare with this? It is as if some kind of Satan, who governs the world with his incredible malice, has said, “this person thinks he is a god, but I will show him that he is under my power. And look at that, people, what your idealist dreams are.”

But that is how we have imagined this tragedy, since we were not part of Scriabin’s inner life. Nowadays, with his notes published, we are aware of the torment with which he was breaking away from this “Mysterium,” changing it to the “Prefatory Act,” as though having clearly understood in his soul that only a “Prefatory Act” was given to him to write (and even this wasn’t given to him). We comprehend the torment with which he approached this and realize his gigantic self-sacrifice. Everything is changing. He senses that he alone is unable to create this “Mysterium,” that only masses of people can bring it forth out of themselves. And so, this is a wise man that lived in ever increasing egoism and reached beyond his limits. He says, the “Prefatory Act!” But, it is not given to a single person in the world to write that “Mysterium,” about which Scriabin had dreamed. And he understands that he can only write the introduction to it.

I can say that I was really shocked when, having looked through his notes, I suddenly encountered at the very end an extraordinarily clear, crystalline transparent observation of Scriabin about himself. “So, I realized that I was mistaken. If I recognize that the spirit created the whole world and he lives in all ‘I’s, then I am not alone. We all see one and the same world. It is necessary to change *everybody’s* view of the world in order for it to be changed. I am not able,” he says, “to do something that will make stones break away from the roadway and fly into the air, although I have power over

² The reference here is to a bacterial infection on Scriabin’s upper lip that led to blood poisoning and ultimately his death on April 14, 1915.

my fantasy. Therefore, the world is not I. In this plexus of atoms that constitutes my imagination, my strengths are very limited. Moreover, I affect the external world in a different way than I affect my fantasy. The pictures within my fantasy I can destroy quickly, but the picture that I see out on the street I can destroy only through physical action.”

And, so now, we have a different concept about the end of Scriabin, maybe one even more terrible.

We see a man who rounded this cape of pride, who realized that he is only able to create the “Prefatory Act” in order to say to all people that life is wonderful, that creativity and even struggle, suffering and hatred are acts, which great souls will accept as colors of an infinitely diverse poem.

One must think this over. According to Scriabin’s deep conviction, even when two people with different ideas confront one another as enemies, each believing identically that he holds the truth, there is a kind of plane where they are still brothers and are able to respect each other. They are the expression of ideas and wills of humans striving towards a harmonious world. It is possible that you are a protector of past values, and that I am a protector of today’s world. But, if each of us possesses a belief, sincerity, and conviction, then even in struggle we are the constructors of what represents human culture or history of the spirit. And so, a musician must always be an advocate of world acceptance in his struggle and creative work. He must be a prophet who never dares to disclaim the petty sides of life or force people to avoid grief, for they are just as necessary as a moment of beauty. I need only to think about how to cease those sufferings that are base and vulgar.

And so this world reflects itself in music. I employed, speaking about Scriabin, almost those very expressions in speaking about Beethoven, which one hundred years ago also called for joy, enlightenment, and harmonization, so that the hearts of millions would beat together. If I said that Beethoven, a teacher of life, is absolutely necessary for us, especially in a time such as ours so full of turbulence and contradiction, and in particular for that architect of his own happiness who in torments is creating a new world for the laboring people, then Scriabin is also extremely necessary for us. The tragic element here becomes more terrible still when you consider that this person, not only through his own talent, but also an internal view of the world and prophetic wisdom, was not simply ahead of, but twice beyond the rest of Russian music of his time. This man, in spite of all the horrors of that earthquake and disruption of our chaotic age, would have appreciated it completely. He would have understood the greatness of our days, in contrast to all his brothers and little brothers who were frightened by the terrible face of reality. This man, after he had de-throned himself from the position of messiah and became a simple hero, had to perish then at the threshold of our times. Here, one could truly cry tears of blood. But having felt regret and sighed about what Scriabin left unfulfilled, it is better now to appeal to his legacy and to touch, as one would a precious stone or sacred token, that which he did give to us. For he became a prophet and herald who stands at the doors of a genuine “Mysterium,” one to which the whole history of mankind has been only a prelude. He teaches not to fear suffering, not to fear death, but to believe in the triumphant life of the spirit.