

The Mystic Chord as the harmonic and structural basis of a late Scriabin work: a comparative study of the *Two Preludes*, Op. 67 (1912-13)

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Abstract: Alexander Scriabin's *Two Preludes*, Op. 67 (1912-1913) are representative of the tonal language of his late works, which was highly chromatic and not obviously related to traditional tertian harmonic processes. An understanding of the harmonies and structures of Op. 67 contributes not only to an understanding of Scriabin's innovative compositional techniques in his late works, but also to an informed basis for making performance decisions.

Keywords: Scriabin, Mystic Chord, *Two Preludes* Op. 67, preludes, piano works, chromatic harmony.

O Acorde Místico como fundamento harmônico e estrutural de uma obra tardia de Scriabin: um estudo comparativo dos *Dois Prelúdios*, Op. 67 (1912-13)

Resumo: Os *Dois Prelúdios*, Op. 67 (1912-1913) de Alexander Scriabin contêm os elementos característicos da linguagem tonal de suas obras tardias, que são altamente cromáticas e não remetem de forma imediata aos processos triádicos tradicionais. Uma compreensão das harmonias e estruturas do Op. 67 contribui não somente para a compreensão das técnicas composicionais inovadoras de Scriabin, mas também para decisões interpretativas.

Palavras-chave: Scriabin, Acorde Místico, *Dois Prelúdios* Op. 67, prelúdio, obras para piano, harmonia cromática.

Alexander Scriabin completed his *Two Preludes*, Op. 67 in 1913 (SCRIABIN, 1973), two years prior to his death. They are representative of the tonal language of his late works, which was highly chromatic and not obviously related to traditional tertian harmonic processes. An element of historical interest is the "pre-serial" nature of the pitch organization of these preludes, in the sense that the notes are generated by a limited number of specific collections of pitch classes transposed to various tonal levels.

Much has been made of the harmonic complexity and sophistication in Scriabin's final works, the last fourteen of which, i.e., Opp. 61-74, are all compositions for piano. The *Two Preludes*, Op. 67 are in the middle of this collection, and they continue Scriabin's effort to push farther toward atonality than any Russian composer had ever gone. These preludes also represent the reserved, non-bombastic aspect of Scriabin's creativity, as well as his increasing fondness in his late works for compositional symmetry and the basing of entire works on surprisingly limited harmonic and melodic material stated in the opening measures.

In further consideration of the context of Op. 67 within Scriabin's late works, it is interesting to observe the large-scale compositional pattern in Opp. 61-71. The even opus numbers are the *Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Sonatas*. The odd opus numbers are poems, etudes, or preludes—including the *Two Preludes*, Op. 67.

The harmonies of Op. 67 are extraordinary, even though the work's melodies, rhythms, and textures are remarkable only for their static, sequential nature. An examination of the harmonies will contribute not only to an understanding of Scriabin's innovative compositional techniques in his late works, but also to an informed basis for making performance decisions. In this study the analytical details are contained in Appendices I, II, III, IV, and V, while the observations based on those details are contained in the text. Although several major reference works¹ discuss aspects of Scriabin's use of the Mystic Chord and other complex harmonies, this study offers the performer a side-by-side comparison of the harmonies and structures of these two preludes, as well as suggestions on applying the analysis to their performance.

Basic structural considerations, including structural similarities

Although the two preludes are contrasting in tempo and character, their structures are related in several obvious ways. As shown in Appendices I and II, both employ an extraordinary amount of repetition, transposition, and sequencing. These two appendices outline the overall structures of the two preludes, which are quite similar: both are ternary, containing Section A, Section B, retransition, return of A material, and a coda. The codas of both are constructed by repeating the previous two measures, then by repeating a fragment of that material; following this, other previously heard material is heard, leading to the final cadence. The overall tonal center of each prelude is C; this may be seen most clearly in the bass line, which begins on C in the first prelude and ends on C in both. Each prelude consists of 35 measures, and in each a single phrase marking connects the entire prelude.

Harmonic basis

The "Mystic Chord" (pitch classes C-F#-Bb-E-A-D, sometimes called the "Prometheus Chord") and three variants are used consistently and somewhat systematically in the first prelude, and five variants are used in the second prelude. These harmonies are discussed in detail in Appendices III, IV, and V. As indicated in Appendix III, the Mystic Chord is termed "Chord 1A," and its three variants in the first prelude are "Chord 1B," "Chord 1C," and Chord "1ABC." The five variants in the second prelude are designated as "Chord 2A" through "Chord 2E."

The two preludes share no common harmonies. That is, no chord in the first prelude appears at any transposition level nor in any inversion in the second prelude. However, with only a few exceptions, transpositions of the Mystic Chord and its variants specified in Appendix III produce all of the pitches in Op. 67. The exceptions – all of which occur in the first prelude – are discussed in Appendix IV. These are the result of non-chord tones used to preserve motivic integrity or to function as chromatic passing tones.

Harmonic processes in the *First Prelude*

The first prelude opens with the Chord 1A—the Mystic Chord—with a root of F#, but stated in inversion, with C in the bass (Ex. 1).

¹ Major references since 1975 that include substantive analyses of harmonies in Scriabin's late works are listed in the bibliographic references of this study.

Chord 1A, root F# Measure 1: Chord 1A, root F# (Chord 1C, root A)

Andante

pp vague, mystérieux

Ex.1: Initial harmony of Op. 67, No. 1

The bottom two notes of all chords in this prelude are a tritone apart. Details about each specific harmony are given in Appendix IV. Several harmonic features underscore the large-scale structure. For example, the chords used throughout the prelude have roots of C, Eb, F#, or A except at the beginning of Section B, where the first four measures (mm. 13-16) have roots of E or G.

The inversions of the chords also reinforce the large-scale structure of the first prelude. In Section A and the transition which follows up to the chord before Section B, the roots do not coincide with the bass notes, i.e., the bass notes are a tritone below the roots. From this point until the retransition, which begins in m. 21, the chords are in root position. From the beginning of the retransition until the final two chords, the bass notes are again a tritone below the roots. Finally, root position is used for the last two chords, which are found at the end of m. 34 and in m. 35.

Chord 1C, root F# Chord 1C, root C

molto rit.

Ex.2: Final two chords of Op. 67, No. 1

Stated in general terms, the chords of Section B and the final two chords are in root position (Ex. 2), while the chords of Sections A, A', and most of the coda are inverted.

The chord choices contribute to the overall structure, too, in that Chords 1A and 1C are prevalent in Sections A and A', and from the retransition to the end, while only Chords 1B and 1ABC are used in Section B up to the retransition. Chord 1ABC appears only in Section B. Chord 1C

occurs in root position only in the last two measures. The Mystic Chord, i.e., Chord 1A, is never heard in root position.

Harmonic processes in the Second Prelude

Except for the final two chords, the entire second prelude is generated by its first four measures through repetition, sequencing, and transposition. Appendix V discusses the specific harmonies used in those measures. As previously mentioned, Appendix II outlines the repetitions, sequences, and transpositions employed throughout the prelude. Exact sequencing is altered only in m. 7, which is the beginning of Section B, in order to produce the opening chord – up an octave – at that structurally significant point. The opening pair of chords is restated at the beginning of the return of Section A in m. 23, and again at the end of m. 32 just prior to the final cadence. Furthermore, prior to each of these strategic locations, the preceding pair of eighth-note chords are the same.

Chords 2B, 2C, and 2D of the second prelude are constructed in a different manner from the chords of the first prelude in that Chords 2B, 2C, and 2D contain a perfect fifth above the root instead of a tritone. Chords 2A and 2E do contain a tritone above the root. As previously noted, throughout the first prelude the bottom two voices in each chord form tritones; in the second prelude they form tritones or perfect fourths.

Since the opening four measures generate most of the prelude's material, it is important to be aware of some of their harmonic and structural features. These include the repetition within m. 1 of its opening beat³, the two sequences of that material – each up a minor third – in m. 2, and the parallel chromatic descent of the bottom three voices from the second eighth note in m. 3 through the second eighth note in m. 4 (Ex. 3).

(repetition) (sequence) (sequence)

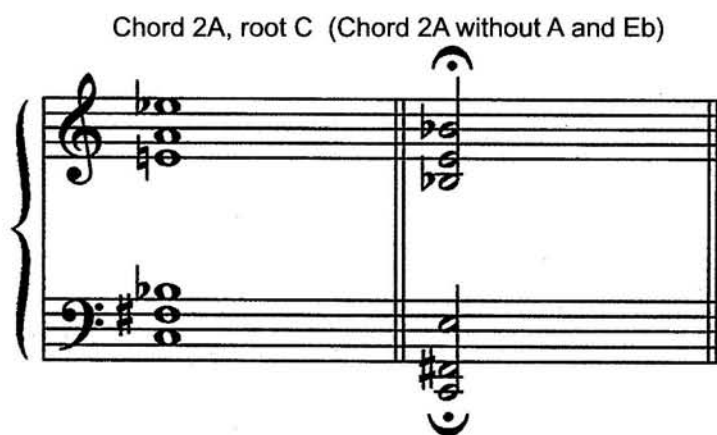
(parallel chromatic descent of all but the top voice)

Ex.3: Measures 1-4 of Op. 67, No. 2

² In this study the beat in Op. 67, No. 2 is considered to be the quarter note.

Throughout the second prelude the inner voices form parallel minor sevenths except for the penultimate chord. Also of particular interest are the whole-tone melody and the whole-tone bass descent stepwise in mm. 19-22, i.e., at the end of the retransition prior to the return of Section A.

Although Scriabin uses chordal inversions systematically to underscore large-scale structures in the first prelude, he uses inversions differently in the second prelude. Only Chord 2A appears in root position, and it is used exclusively in that manner. Chords 2B, 2C, 2D, and 2E appear only in inversion, each bass note being a perfect fourth below the root. All of these chords in their designated inversions appear in every section of the prelude, including the retransition and the coda. Chord 2A is heard as a “French sixth” sonority – with the top tritone of the hexachord omitted – only at the end (Ex. 4).



Ex.4: Final measure of Op. 67, No. 2

Some additional observations

Other similarities between the two preludes include the final harmonies, which in both cases are variants of the Mystic Chord in root position with C as the root. Surprisingly, all interval classes except the tritone are used melodically in both preludes. As is common in Scriabin's late works, both preludes employ much melodic motion and chord root movement in minor thirds. Minor thirds also help define the large dimensions of the first prelude. The bottom two notes of all chords in combination in Section A and the transition which follows form the diminished seventh chord C-Eb-F#-A; in the first four measures of Section B (mm. 13-16) those notes form E-G-Bb-C#; and in measure 17 to the end they again form C-Eb-F#-A.

Performance considerations

Understanding the harmonies and structure of Op. 67 will enable pianists to approach the performance of this work from a more informed perspective. However, applying the analysis to performance practice is problematic because, despite the harmonic boldness of the musical language, the music is so often melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically static. The best performance practice is to communicate the large structure of each prelude as clearly as possible within Scriabin's notated intentions.

In the first prelude, Section A is marked “vague, mysterious,” and it should be kept very quiet and understated. The arrival of Section B in m. 13 is marked by the longest and highest note yet to be heard in the work, e^2 . Despite the fact that the dynamic level remains *pianissimo*, this note

should be brought out by the performer because of the *tenuto* marking as well as the agogic consideration, thus signaling a structural arrival. The loudest portions of the work are in Section B, and Scriabin underscores them by using the work's thickest texture—seven voices. The only exception to this is the rolled chord at the end, which contains eight voices. The return of Section A at m. 27 is reinforced by a return to *pianissimo*. This structural arrival will be further clarified by a slight relaxing of the tempo at the end of m. 26.

In the second prelude, the opening Section A is again marked *pianissimo*, but, unlike the first prelude, Section B is not signaled by a change of rhythm. The beginning of Section B in m. 7 should be made clear by the performer through (1) its louder dynamic marking of *mezzo piano*, (2) its approach by a dramatic upward leap in both hands (the largest voice leading leap in the prelude), and (3) its opening note, which is – as in the beginning of the first prelude's Section B – the highest pitch to this point. Section B crescendos to the loudest point of the work, which is the beginning of the retransition in m. 15. Following a long diminuendo of eight measures (mm. 15–22—almost one-fourth of the work), the return of Section A in m. 23 is quite similar in nature to that of the first prelude. At that point there is a return of the opening *pianissimo* dynamic level, which should be prepared with a slight relaxation of the tempo in m. 22. Although the first prelude ends with a *molto ritardando*, no such tempo modification is necessary in the second prelude, because it ends with a dramatic lengthening of note values. Prior to the long notes of the final three measures, the second prelude contains continuous sixteenth-note triplets in the left hand.

In summation, despite dramatic differences between the two preludes of Op. 67, important similarities are also present. The similarities as well as the differences must be understood and communicated by the performer in order that the two preludes may combine to form a musically unified and satisfying whole.

APPENDIX I: STRUCTURAL STATEMENTS, REPETITIONS, TRANSPOSITIONS, AND SEQUENCES IN OP. 67, NO. 1

Measure(s) Description

Section A (mm. 1-10)

- 1 Statement of material. Motive x is stated in top voice (see below).
- 2 Repetition of m. 1.
- 3-4 Related (sequenced up a minor third/extended) statement. A free sequence of motive x is stated in the top voice of m. 3. Motive y is stated in the top voice of m. 4.



- 5 Repetition of m. 3.
- 6 Varied repetition of m. 5.
- 7-11 Repetition of m. 1-5.

Transition (mm. 11-12)

- 12 Top voice is a free sequence of m. 11's motive x.

Section B (mm. 13-20)

- 13-14 Statement of material. Variant of motive y in moving voice of m. 14.
 15 Transposition of m. 1 up a minor seventh plus the F-B tritone and change of inversion.
 15-16 After the first note, the top voice is a transposition of mm. 3-4 up a perfect fifth.
 17-20 Sequence of mm. 13-16 down a minor second.

Retransition (mm. 21-26)

- 21 Transposition of m. 1 up a tritone.
 21-22 Top voice is a sequence of mm. 19-20 down a minor third.
 23-24 Sequence of mm. 21-22 down a minor third. After the first note, the top voice is a repetition of the first joined statement of motives x and y in mm. 3-4.
 25-26 Extension. After the first note in each measure, the remaining notes in the top voice are repetitions of those notes in mm. 23. Beginning with the fourth eighth note, mm. 25-26 is a repetition of mm. 5-6.

Section A' (mm. 27-30)

- 27-28 Repetition of mm. 1-2.
 29-30 Repetition of mm. 5-6.

Coda (mm. 31-35)

- 31-32 Repetition of mm. 29-30.
 33 Repetition of m. 32.
 33-35 After the first note, the top voice is a repetition of mm. 11-13.

APPENDIX II: STRUCTURAL STATEMENTS, REPETITIONS, TRANSPOSITIONS, AND SEQUENCES IN OP. 67, NO. 2

Measure(s) Description

Section A (mm. 1-6)

- 1 Beat 1³ is a statement of material. Beat 2 is a repetition of beat 1.
 2 Beat 1 is a sequence of m. 1, beat 2 up a minor third. Beat 2 is a sequence of beat 1 up a minor third.
 3-4 Statement of material. M. 4, beat 2 is a transposition of m. 3, beat 1 down a perfect fourth.
 5-6 Sequence of mm. 3-4 down a major second.

Section B (mm. 7-14)

- 7-8 Varied sequence of mm. 5-6 up a perfect fourth. The sequence is exact except for the first bass note, which is raised by a half step to match the opening chord of the work.
 9-10 M. 9, beat 1 is a sequence of m. 8, beat 2 up a minor third. M. 9, beat 2 and m. 10, beat 1 are a repetition of m. 8, beat 2 and m. 9, beat 1.

³ In this study the beat in Op. 67, No. 2 is considered to be the quarter note.

11-14 Varied sequence of mm. 7-10 up a major third. The sequence is exact except for the first bass note, which has been lowered by a half step, returning the chord to its original harmonic content (see the description of mm. 7-8 above).

Retransition (mm. 15-22)

15-16 Transposition of mm. 11-12 up a major third.

17-18 Sequence of mm. 15-16 down a major second.

19-22 M. 19, beat 1 is a sequence of m. 18, beat 2 up a minor third. From m. 19 to the end of m. 22, each beat is a sequence down in major seconds.

Section A (mm. 23-28)

23-28 Repetition of mm. 1-6.

Coda (mm. 29-35)

29-30 Repetition of mm. 27-28.

31-32 M. 31, beats 1 and 2, and m. 32, beat 1 are repetitions of m. 30, beat 2. M. 32, beat 2 is a repetition of the opening chords of the work.

33-35 Cadential material.

APPENDIX III: THE MYSTIC CHORD AND ITS VARIANTS USED IN OP. 67

Basic harmonies. In this example, all chords will be built on pitch class C for the purpose of clarity. These chords, transposed to various levels, form the basis for all of the pitches in Op. 67.

1. Chords used in Op. 67, No. 1:

a. Chord 1A is the mystic chord.

Chord 1A, root C = C-F#-Bb-E-A-D

b. Chord 1B is Chord 1A with the last note lowered by a half step.

Chord 1B, root C = C-F#-Bb-E-A-Db

c. Chord 1C is Chord 1B with a perfect fifth added above the root.

Chord 1C, root C = C-F#-G-Bb-E-A-Db

d. Chord 1ABC combines all notes of Chords 1A, 1B, and 1C.

Chord 1ABC, root C = C-F#-G-Bb-E-A-Db-D.

Chord 1A Chord 1 Chord 1 Chord 1ABC

2. Chords used in Op. 67, No. 2:

- a. Chord 2A is the mystic chord with the last note raised by a half step.
Chord 2A, root C = C-F#-Bb-E-A-D#
(Note: This chord is a tritone transposition of itself, i.e., Chord 2A, root F# = F#-C-E-Bb-Eb-A.)
- b. Chord 2B is formed by using the following from Chord 2A: the first note (i.e., the root), the second note raised by a half step (forming a perfect fifth above the root), the third note, and the last note.
Chord 2B, root C = C-G-Bb-Eb (i.e., a C minor-minor seventh chord)
- c. Chord 2C is Chord 2B with the last note raised by a half step.
Chord 2C, root C = C-G-Bb-E (i.e., a C major-minor seventh chord)
- d. Chord 2D is Chord 2C with the last note raised by a half step.
Chord 2D, root C = C-G-Bb-F
- e. Chord 2E is Chord 2D with the last note raised by a half step.
Chord 2E, root C = C-G-Bb-F#

Chord 2A	Chord 2B	Chord 2C	Chord 2D	Chord 2E

APPENDIX IV: TRANSPOSITIONS OF THE BASIC HARMONIES USED IN OP. 67, NO. 1

All chords are spelled with the root given first. Parentheses indicate chord tones not present in the music. Enharmonic spellings are those appearing in the music. All chord locations in the work are indicated except those produced by repetition of the entire texture. Those repetitions are outlined in Appendix I. The chords below produce almost⁴ all of the pitches in this prelude.

- Chord 1A:** root A = A-Eb-G-Db-Gb-Cb. Used only in m. 23 (first three beats).
 root C = B#-F#-A#-E-A-D. Used only in m. 21 (first three beats).
 root F# = F#-C-E-Bb-Eb-Ab. Used in m. 1 (first three beats) and m. 3 (first two beats).

4 There are a few exceptions in Op. 67, No. 1: (1) The second and third eighth notes in m. 14 (C and A) do not fit Chord 1B, root E. These non-chord tones are needed to preserve the intervallic integrity of motive y – compare the moving voice in m. 14 with the top voice in m. 4. (2) The last eighth note in m. 14 (Eb) is a chromatic passing tone. (3) The second eighth note in m. 16 (G) does not fit Chord 1ABC, root E. This non-chord tone is needed to preserve again the intervallic integrity of motive y – compare the top voice in m. 16 with that of m. 4. Since mm. 17-20 is a sequence of mm. 13-16, the above non-chord tones recur there at a different tonal level.

Inversions: From the beginning through the first three eighth notes in m. 12, the roots do not coincide with the bass notes, i.e., the bass notes are a tritone below the roots. From the ending portion of m. 12 through m. 20, the chords are in root position. From m. 21 through the first three eighth notes of m. 34, the bass notes are again a tritone below the roots. The final two chords, consisting of the last two eighth notes in m. 34 through m. 35, are in root position.

Chord 1B: root D# = D#-A-(C#)-(G)-C-E. Used only in m. 17 and the first beat of m. 18.

root E = E-Bb-(D)-(Ab)-Db-F. Used only in m. 13 and the first beat of m. 14.

root F# = F#-C-E-Bb-D#-G. Used in m. 3 (third beat), m. 12 (last two beats), and m. 18 (fourth beat).

root G = G-C#-F-B-E-Ab. Used only in m. 14 (fourth beat).

Chord 1C: root A = A-Eb-Fb-G-Db-Gb-Bb. Used in m. 1 (last two beats).
 root C = C-F#-G-Bb-E-A-Db. Used in mm. 3 (last two beats)-4, mm. 5 (last two beats)-6, mm. 11 (last two beats)-12 (first three beats), mm. 23 (last two beats)-26, and m. 35.
 root D# = D#-A-Bb-C#-G-C-E. Used only in mm. 21 (last two beats)-22.
 root F# = F#-C-Db-E-(Bb)-Eb-G. Used only as the penultimate chord in m. 34 (last two beats).

Chord 1ABC: root Eb = Eb-A-Bb-Db-G-C-Fb-F. Used only in mm. 19-20.

root E = E-A#-B-D-G#-C#-F-F#. Used only in mm. 15-16.

APPENDIX V: TRANSPOSITIONS OF THE BASIC HARMONIES USED IN OP. 67, NO. 2

All chords are spelled with the root given first. Parentheses indicate chord tones not present in the music. Enharmonic spellings are those appearing in the music. Except for the work's final two chords in mm. 33-35, the entire prelude is generated by measures 1-4 through repetition, sequencing, and transposition, as outlined in Appendix II. The chords in measures 1-4 and 33-35 are as follows:

Measure 1:

Chord 2B, root C = C-G-Bb-Eb

Chord 2A, root Eb = Eb-A-(Db)-G-C-F#

Measure 2:

Chord 2B, root Eb = Eb-Bb-Db-Gb

Chord 2A, root Gb = Gb-C-(E)-Bb-Eb-A

Chord 2B, root F# = F#-C#-E-A

Chord 2A, root A = A-D#-(G)-C#-F#-B#

Measure 3:

Chord 2A, root Eb = Eb-A-(C#)-G-C-(F#)

(Note: These pitches are the same as those of the previous chord, since Chord 2A is a tritone transposition of itself.)

Chord 2E, root Ab = Ab-Eb-F#-D

Chord 2B, root G = G-D-F-Bb

Chord 2C, root Gb = Gb-Db-Fb-Bb

Measure 4:

Chord 2D, root F = F-C-Eb-Bb

Chord 2B, root E = E-B-D-G

Chord 2A, root Bb = Bb-E-(G#)-D-G-(C#)

Chord 2E, root Eb = Eb-Bb-C#-A

Final two chords:

Measures 33-34 = Chord 2A, root C = C-F#-Bb-(E)-A-Eb

Measure 35 = Chord 2A, root C = C-F#-Bb-E-(A)-(Eb)

Inversions: Chord 2A always appears in root position. Chords 2B, 2C, 2D, and 2E always appear in inversion, each bass note being a perfect fourth below the root.

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