

This paper was delivered at the
University of Michigan Scriabin Symposium

on 24 January 2000 (Ann Arbor)

A shortened version of this presentation appeared in UM's *Journal of the International Institute* 7:3 (Spr/Sum 2000), pp. 1, 18-20

Published as "The Theosophical World of Aleksandr Scriabin" in the *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America* 12:1 (Winter 2007-2008). 54-62

**Fashionable Occultism:
The Theosophical World of Aleksandr Scriabin**

by Maria Carlson

In the years that led up to the social, cultural, and political explosion that was the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Russian composer Aleksandr Scriabin (1872-1915) pushed the rich Russian musical tradition, then resting on the pillars of Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, and Moussorgsky, in the direction of mysticism and symbolism. His involvement with Mme. Blavatsky's Theosophy, an eclectic, mystical-philosophical doctrine popular in Europe and America in the last quarter of the 19th century, influenced the composition of Scriabin's sonatas, symphonies, his two major orchestral poems (the famous "Le poème de l'extase" [1907] and "Prométhée, le poème du feu" [1910]), and short piano pieces. A knowledge of Theosophy can greatly add to our appreciation of Scriabin's music and help us to understand more completely Scriabin's impulse to creativity and his desire to transfigure the world through art.

A. The Mood of the Russian Fin-de-siècle

The seeming contradictions of Scriabin's own character are reflected in Russian culture as the 19th century moved toward fragmentation and end.¹ To many, the eve of the 20th century must have appeared as two different worlds occupying the same physical space. One was the "outside" world of a growing bourgeoisie, the rise of popular culture, positivism, and materialism. It was the sunlit, rational, scientific world of Max Planck and quantum mechanics, Konrad Roentgen and the x-ray, Albert Einstein and the theory of relativity (1905), and the invention of cinema, the motor car, the airplane, and the bicycle.

1 Leonid Sabaneyeff described Scriabin as "a fantastic with a mystical twist, a megalomaniac who now spoke with complete conviction of his own divineness and then, on the other hand, a rationalist seeking in music a scheme, geometry, harmoniousness that was mathematical" (Leonid Sabaneyeff, *Modern Russian Composers*, transl. Judah A. Joffe [New York: International Publishers, 1927], p. 40).

But there was another world, a darker, more mysterious "inside" world. It was the world of Friedrich Nietzsche and a strange philosophy of eternal return, of Richard Wagner and the mythopoetic drama, the French *poètes maudits*, of painters who painted landscapes of the mind, of Mme. Blavatsky and Theosophy, Alan Kardec and Spiritualism, of Freud, and Jung, and the new "psychic science."

The physical reality of this dualistic world consisted of expanding industry, dirty factories, grim workers, and what appeared as the threatening vulgarity and mediocrity of a growing middle class. The power of the Church over the hearts and minds of people was deteriorating, and with its deterioration and a rising atheism a coherent framework for life seemed to be disappearing. Suicide rates and drug addiction were going up, moral standards were going down. Prostitution, anti-Semitism, crushing poverty, epidemics and disease belonged to this world. There existed a pervasive sense that civilization was coming to an end and that a degenerate Europe (to include Russia) would be wiped out -- by either socialism, or the machine, or by a barbarian invasion from the East (the "Yellow Peril," a sort of atavistic vision of a second Mongol Invasion).

Politically, this period was also one of decay: the doomed Romanov dynasty was destroying itself, there was a war in the East (the Russo-Japanese War of 1905-6), and a Russian revolution in 1905 that brought agrarian upheaval and major postal, telephone, railway, and factory strikes that crippled the country. We know in hindsight that this period would end with a bang -- World War, Bolshevik Revolution, and Civil War. And that things would never be the same again.

The psychological tensions caused by this dual reality generated a malaise, or *mal du siècle*, that led the elite and the sensitive to reject that physical reality and gave them a strong desire to escape from it into some alternative universe where the spirit of man was still the supreme value. Art, music, and literature, of course, offer the immediate possibility of escape from utility, materialism, "progress" (whatever that was supposed to be), mediocrity, and dullness.

In the small, intimate world of the Russian intelligentsia, in which Scriabin lived, there was a frantic attempt to cope creatively with the decay of old cultural values, to escape creatively from the impending crisis of culture and consciousness, to bridge the growing chasm between science and religion, reason and faith. Ironically, these psychological and philosophical tensions created in Russian cultural life at the turn of the century an intense period of blossoming in all the arts.

B. General Interest in the Occult

People respond in different ways to extreme, even tectonic shifts in their physical, intellectual, and psychic environments. Among the upper middle class and the intelligentsia, many responded by undertaking intense spiritual searches that took them in untraditional directions,

namely to religious philosophies, orthodox and unorthodox, speculative mysticism, and occult and esoteric philosophies of every kind.

Occultism, in a bewildering variety of forms, was a popular intellectual fashion of the period. Every educated reader who was not a recluse had at least a nodding acquaintance with Spiritualism and Theosophy, but there was also Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Martinism, Hermeticism, and, of course, all those manifestations of "common," or "boulevard" mysticism, such as somnambulism, chiromancy, tarot, phrenology, mesmerism, astrology, fortune-telling, crystal balls, and dream interpretation. In the cities, people attended public and private seances, demonstrations of hypnotism, and lectures by famous Indian yogis. People knew about these things, even if some of their knowledge was based only on salon discussions or sensational newspaper articles.

If occultism was an intellectual fashion of the *fin-de-siècle*, over time it was, like all fashions must be, replaced by other fashions, with the result that the "occult" aspect of Silver Age culture probably has not received the attention it deserves from historians. What seems eccentric and esoteric to us today was not always so. Unlike many of us today, Russian readers and critics at the turn of the century had little difficulty in recognizing, however superficially, the presence of occult paradigms, images, and vocabulary in the art, literature, and culture of the Silver Age. The Symbolist writer Andrei Belyi (1880-1934), for instance, was ashamed that his novel *The Silver Dove* was so "obviously Theosophical," yet no critic would use the word "obviously" today. Modern lack of interest in late 19th century occult philosophy, however, does not mean it is unimportant, especially to studies of figures like Scriabin, Andrei Belyi, Konstantin Bal'mont, Max Voloshin, Nikolai Roerich, Vasily Kandinsky, and other creative individuals who were serious occultists.

And for those creative, innovative individuals, occult philosophy was not an amusing entertainment, but a life-time philosophical pursuit that impinged on all aspects of their personal, spiritual, and creative/aesthetic lives. To ignore completely this dimension in their work is like trying to understand medieval art while ignoring Christianity.

C. Theosophy and the Russian Intelligentsia

While Spiritualism, in both its French, mystical variant and its Anglo-American pseudo-scientific guise, was by far the most popular of the occult movements entrancing Russians at the end of the 19th century, it was Theosophy that took particular hold of certain influential members of the Russian creative intelligentsia. Their attitude toward Theosophy was complex; it was not a naive acceptance of Theosophy as a pat answer to the 19th century's crisis of culture and consciousness. They did not write the Theosophists off as crack-pots, but took their engagement with Theosophy seriously, viewing it as a legitimate voice in the larger, rather confused dialogue on topics of culture, religion, and philosophy that characterized their age.

The creative intelligentsia was quick to identify and respond not only to Theosophy's religious and philosophical dimensions, but also to the mythic, poetic, and aesthetic implications of Theosophical thought. This was especially true of the Russian Symbolist writers and artists, who drew inspiration from Theosophy and even used its cosmogenetic paradigm and its syncretistic doctrine to justify their own theories that true art was religious creativity and the true artist, a being in touch with the divine, a high priest.

About whom are we speaking when we refer to the Theosophically- inclined creative intelligentsia? Among them were not only committed Theosophists like poets Konstantin Bal'mont, Nikolai Minsky, Max Voloshin, and Andrei Belyi, but also curious seekers who flirted with but eventually left Theosophy, like the writers Aleksei Remizov, Valerii Briusov, and Viacheslav Ivanov.

Certain Russian modernist painters (Nikolai Roerich, Margarita Sabashnikova, and Vasily Kandinsky) felt that Theosophical knowledge enhanced the spiritual and intellectual content of their work. In music, Scriabin based his theory that the creation of music was a theurgic act, an act of magical, even divine creation, directly on Theosophical doctrine. Like the literary Symbolists, Scriabin (and the parallels between Belyi's theoretical writings and Scriabin's expressed opinions are striking), Scriabin was concerned with Theosophy's concept of theurgy (the act of divine creation), the essence of incantation and rhythm as a profoundly "magic" act, *sobornost'* ("councilarity") as mystical experience, art as a form of religious action, the synthesis of matter and spirit -- all these notions are also central to Theosophy. Theosophy touched the interests of the religious and esoteric philosophers Vladimir Solov'ev (the godfather of Russian philosophical symbolism), Nikolai Berdiaev (the Christian existentialist philosopher), and P.D. Uspensky (the occultist), who felt the psychological attraction of Theosophical thought and pursued it at a formative time in their lives, although they eventually went in other directions.

The creative intelligentsia and the Theosophists spoke a mutually intelligible, if not identical, language. Like other intellectual movements of the early 20th century, Russian Theosophy clearly reflected the apocalypticism of its age. Certain aspects of its doctrine played upon the eschatological fears and expectations of the Russian Silver Age. Theosophical notions of world catastrophe, cleansing destruction, suffering, and the building of a new, superior culture in which Russia would play a leading role were variants on the same messianic theme dear to Russian god-seekers (idealists) and god-builders (rationalists) alike. Theosophy resonated not only to the religious visions of Nikolai Fedorov, Vladimir Solov'ev, and Dmitry Merezhkovsky, but also to the theurgical aspirations of Maksim Gorky, based on his personal transmutations of modern Theosophy and Slavic sectarian gnosticism. Gorky's vision of a New Nature and a New World (subsequently assimilated to its socialist expression as the Radiant Future) had roots in Theosophical thought.² Socialism produced its own Prometheanism.

2 See Mikhail Agursky, "Maksim Gorky and the Decline of Bolshevik Theomachy," in *Christianity and Russian Culture in Soviet Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 81, 84 ff. Agursky discusses in detail Gorkii's Theosophical contacts.

Many members of the intelligentsia, particularly among the modernist writers and religious thinkers, were also able to find common ground with the Theosophists because their personal views of religion tended toward the unconventional. Like the Theosophists, they, too, were interested in ancient mystery cults, sectarianism, gnosticism, oriental religions, and the history of religious thought. Such views were occasionally expressed at the meetings of the various Religious-Philosophical Societies that formed in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, and other cities of the Russian empire. The more intellectually inclined Theosophists also belonged to these Societies and participated in their discussions. The names of the leading Russian idealist philosophers (Sergei Bulgakov, E.N. Trubetskoi, Sergei Frank, Nikolai Berdiaev, Vasily Rozanov, Aleksandr Meier, Dmitry Filosofov, and N.O. Lossky) frequently appeared in *Vestnik Teosofii* [Herald of Theosophy], the principal journal of the Russian Theosophists; their lectures and articles were regularly reported and reviewed in its pages. "Closely observing the religious seeking of our time, one cannot pass by Theosophy, because for certain strata of contemporary educated society Theosophy has made it easier to come to religion," Berdiaev pointed out.³

D. What Theosophy Is

If Theosophy was important for this group of creative intelligentsia, what, exactly, was it?

In the broadest sense, the word "theosophy" comes from the Greek ("theo-sophia," divine wisdom) and refers to "the wisdom of God." Here the term refers to various systems of mystic gnosis reflected in Buddhism, Neo-Platonism, mystery religions, and the speculative mysticism of philosophers like Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), and Vladimir Solov'ev (1953-1900).

In the narrower sense, however, Theosophy refers to a pseudo-religious movement, founded on November 17, 1875, in New York City by an eccentric Russian expatriate named Helena Blavatsky, or simply "HPB" (1831-1891). Assisted by her Spiritualist friend, Colonel Henry Olcott (1832-1907), this woman of genius (or notorious charlatan, depending on one's point of view) created the Theosophical Society, an organization that within twenty-five years was internationally headquartered in Adyar, India, and boasted tens of thousands of members worldwide. Theosophy soon spread to Russia, attracting numerous adherents there from the middle, professional, and gentry classes.

The exoteric, or open aim of the Theosophical Society, as stated in its charter, was to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction by race, color, creed, or caste. Many Theosophists lived their creed: they did not drink alcohol or eat meat; they ran soup kitchens, pioneered Montessori education and child care, supported working women, worked with the poor, and learned Esperanto so that they could communicate internationally.

3 Berdiaev, *Tipy religioznoi mysli v Rossii* (Paris: YMCA, 1989), 1.

The subsidiary goals of the Society were to sponsor the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; to demonstrate the importance of such study; and to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the psychic powers latent in man. A small Esoteric Section of the Society met to study the more sophisticated, theurgic mysteries of Theosophy, which were not for everyone -- but for the more "spiritually advanced."

Theosophists define their doctrine as a syncretic, mystical, religious-philosophical system, a "synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy," supposedly based on an ancient esoteric tradition that Mme. Blavatsky called the "Secret Doctrine" or the "Wisdom Religion." Through "comparative esotericism" (the study of all the world's religious and occult doctrines of the past), Blavatsky's Theosophy claimed to distill out the universal mother doctrine that ageless adepts had been jealously guarding from the uninitiated for thousands of years. Mme. Blavatsky called these adepts "mahatmas," or "masters."

These ancient sages, she claimed, lived in a lodge somewhere in the Himalayas and in the natural way had little truck with mankind. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, this "Brotherhood of the White Lodge, the Hierarchy of Adepts who watch over and guide the evolution of humanity, and who have preserved these truths unimpaired," decided that the time had come for some of these truths to be gradually revealed to mankind through certain chosen vessels.⁴ The first chosen vessel turned out to be Mme. Blavatsky herself. She explicated her wisdom religion in two lengthy Theosophical texts, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), claiming that these epics of Theosophical thought were "dictated" to her by the Mahatmas, with whom she was in direct psychic communication.

The texts Mme. Blavatsky wrote outlining her "Secret Doctrine" were eclectic, syncretic, dogmatic, strongly pantheistic, and heavily laced with exotic Buddhist thought and vocabulary and not a few false analogies. Combining bits and pieces of Neo-Platonism, Brahminism, Buddhism, Kabbalism, Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism, Hermeticism, and other occult doctrines, past and present, in an occasionally indiscriminating philosophical *mélange*, what Mme. Blavatsky was attempting to do with Theosophy was to create a "scientific" religion, a modern gnosis, based on absolute *knowledge* of things spiritual rather than on *faith*. It was an attempt to bridge the perceived abyss between science and religion, reason and faith.

But under Theosophy's Neo-Buddhism lies an essentially Judaeo-Christian moral ethic tempered by spiritual Darwinism (survival not of those with the fittest organism, but of those with the "fittest" spirit). Theosophy could be described as an attempt to disguise positivism as religion, an attempt that was seductive indeed in its own time, given that the end of the 19th century, much as today, was torn by the psychic tension produced by the seemingly unresolvable dichotomy between science and religion. And so Mme. Blavatsky's new

4 Annie Besant, *Ancient Wisdom* (orig. 1897; Adyar, Madras, 1977), p. 41.

Theosophy offered nineteenth-century man an alternative to the dominant materialism, rationalism, and positivism of the age.

Although the Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 and grew quickly worldwide (despite the numerous scandals and exposés that followed in its formidable founder's wake), the Russian Theosophical Society was not officially registered and chartered in St. Petersburg until 30 September (O.S.), 1908, following social reforms forced by the 1905 Revolution. Nevertheless, Theosophy existed in Russia long before the official registration of the Society, for Russians who traveled abroad often became members of the national sections of the Society in England, Belgium, Germany, and France. Scriabin, for example, was a member of the Belgian Lodge. Most Russian Theosophists belonged to the English or German sections. Documented private Theosophical circles existed in major Russian cities from the early 1890s and Theosophical texts circulated in French, German, and English texts and hand-copied manuscripts (a form of Theosophical *samizdat*).

Popular knowledge about Mme. Blavatsky's notorious scandals and her exotic myth of the Mahatmas have tended, over the years, to relegate Theosophy to the lunatic fringe of philosophy and to obscure the fact that Theosophy nevertheless has a complex cosmology that strives to explain God, the Universe, and Man. Its doctrine is a modern form of metaphysical monism, emanationism, and pantheism. As such, it traces all existence back to the emanations of a single, ineffable, unknowable Godhead. The Godhead emanates out and creates the Universe. Because the Universe "unrolls" from the Godhead, God is everywhere and in everything (pantheism). At the end of time, all existence "rolls back up" into the Godhead. This is the "outbreathing" and the "inbreathing" of Brahma. The process cyclically repeats into eternity.

The human soul, likewise an emanation of this single reality of the Godhead, transmigrates through an enormous number of lifetimes, first downward, from spirit into matter, then back up from matter into spirit. Each incarnation is shaped by the karma generated by good or evil acts. At the end of the 19th century, Mme. Blavatsky announced that the present era of earth history marks a turning point at which the downward march of humanity into matter must be reversed; enlightened individuals, aided by the revelations of Theosophical doctrine, are ready to begin the ascent to the realm of the spirit, ready to be rolled up into the godhead, to become god. This could be appealing to some.

All-embracing, Theosophy derives its particular psychology and complex cosmology from sacred Hindu texts, mystery religions, Gnosticism, neo-Platonism, and the vast body of Western occultism, both ancient and modern, with interpolations from the natural and social sciences, comparative religion, archaeology, medicine, and evolutionism. The result is a syncretic blend of pantheism, occultism, and facile rationalism.

E. Theosophy and the Creative Artist

If we are interested in understanding creative artists motivated by speculative mysticism (as Scriabin, or Andrei Belyi, or Nikolai Roerich, or Vasily Kandinsky were), then we need to become sufficiently acquainted with Theosophy to discern evidence of the contact of the creative personality with it, when valid, and to consider the ways in which a Theosophical world conception or the use of key Theosophical imagery and vocabulary might influence the artist's work. Some knowledge of Theosophy can be particularly productive in dealing with modernism in Russian literature and abstraction in Russian painting, for example. In his book *The Sounding Cosmos* (which critics accept or reject), Sixten Ringbom writes about the tremendous social and intellectual changes that occurred during the *fin-de-siècle* and points out that it is no coincidence that "abstract art [in all its various expressions] emerged by the end of the first decade of our [20th] century, the same decade that saw the publication of theosophical works describing the non-objective worlds in texts and illustrations." He goes on to say that Theosophy was "the creed that contained, as it were, a built-in link between the spiritualistic world conception and its materialization in an image."⁵

In the case of Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, both of whom read Annie Besant's, Charles W. Leadbeater's, and Rudolf Steiner's creative descriptions of life on higher planes and in different forms of refined matter, their abstract art clearly emerged from a desire to portray spiritual and psychic realities, and not from mere boredom with representational painting or the experience of alienating *Angst* (although that may have come later, and was probably exacerbated by the subsequent loss of the spiritual that the first generation of abstractionists was seeking to avoid). When the two painters, both interested in Theosophy, used words like "mystic" and "spiritual" to describe their art, they had specific connotations in mind.

This interesting thought, that abstraction in the painting and music may have emerged from a desire to portray spiritual and psychic, rather than physical realities, to depict the fourth dimension, so to speak, can be pursued into the realm of modern literature as well. The resonance between the abstract paintings of Kandinsky, the modernist novels of Andrei Belyi, and the compositions of Scriabin is suggestive. All were highly creative personalities, had rigorous academic training, and were seriously interested in Theosophy. Belyi was philosophically and aesthetically saturated with Theosophical doctrine; Kandinsky was more selective; Scriabin was totally committed; he even defined the concept of "Ecstasy," which is central to his creative philosophy and to his world view, as "seeing on the higher planes of nature."

5 Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study of the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (Åbo [Turku], Finland: Åbo Akademi, 1970), p. 24. (Series: Acta Academiae Åboensis, Ser. A: Humaniora, vol. 38, No. 2). Discussing the source of Kandinsky's innovations in the area of abstraction, Ringbom points out that "it is one of the ironies of art history that the abstract idiom which its founders intended as a vehicle for communicating an essential content actually came to be regarded as a play with forms, that 'inhaltsloses Spiel mit den Formen' which Kandinsky dreaded. If expressed publicly in our own day, the claims made by the pioneers of abstract art would probably be dismissed as expressions of naiveté or affectation" (113).

In the case of all three artists, the notion of the modern that emerges in their work is one based on the supersensible perceptions of a higher reality, on the representation of that which occurs beyond the plane of gross matter, where spiritual "forms" need not necessarily resemble the forms of physical matter found in this world at all. Their works strive for an intellectual and spiritual dimension that is simultaneously personal and universal. Like the Theosophists, these artists strip away the "outer garments" of their historical period and their own personalities to reach the eternal and spiritual in art.

This explication has been very abstract. I would like to provide a concrete example of how a specific Theosophical idea might have affected the Russian Silver Age artist.

Among the most provocative Theosophical works for many European and Russian creative artists was Mrs. Besant's and Charles Leadbeater's small volume, *Thought-Forms*.⁶ Mrs. Annie Besant (1847-1933) was the heir to Mme. Blavatsky's Theosophical empire. Coming out of the tradition of Fabian socialism to mysticism, she cleaned up many of the scandals and the excesses of the movement's founder, whom she mythologized and appropriately distanced through hagiography, creating a modern Blavatsky industry.

This interesting little book was devoted to the mysticism of form, color, and vibration, and to the use of color and abstract forms as representing emotions, thoughts, and feelings projected onto the astral plane. The astral plane is the second of seven levels of being. Most of us live in the gross matter of the physical, or material, plane, unaware that there is also an astral plane, mental plane, and beyond them, intuitional, spiritual, monadic, and, finally, divine planes. These seven planes of existence, Mrs. Besant tells us, are "concentric interpenetrating spheres, not separated from each other by distance, but by difference of constitution."⁷ They actually exist simultaneously, occupy the same space, and are, in fact, differing dimensions, or states of matter and consciousness (Rudolf Steiner). They are invisible to the average human being, but can be contacted by those who are mentally ill, in a dreaming state, or spiritually trained to access them.

Thoughts and feelings can become palpable on the astral plane; they can take form. To understand this, we need to turn our thinking a few degrees. While the materialists insisted that thought was the product of chemical reactions in the brain, that matter generated thought (our synapses firing), the occultists reversed this: thought, they said, generated matter. In *Isis Unveiled*, Mme. Blavatsky writes the following:

As God creates, so man can create. Given a certain intensity of will, and the shapes created by the mind become subjective. Hallucinations, they are called, although to

6 Mrs. Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1901; numerous subsequent editions in all major languages).

7 Annie Besant, *Ancient Wisdom*, p. 63.

their creator they are real as any visible object is to anyone else. Given a more intense and intelligent concentration of this will, and the form becomes concrete, visible, objective; the man has learned the secret of secrets.⁸

Mrs. Besant called these forces, the result of "intense and intelligent concentration" of will, "thought-forms." Thought-forms are a mental projection, thought, or idea, too subtle to be seen in gross physical matter, but which manifests itself in refined astral matter. While it may assume shapes reminiscent of objects in physical matter, it more commonly assumes an abstract form natural to the astral or mental plane, and such a form would have nothing in common with its source on the physical plane. The book contains illustrations of such thought-forms: geometric figures, star bursts, hazy clouds, even proto-computer graphics, all highly suggestive of later abstract art.

Thought-forms (according to Mrs. Besant) take their particular structure from the vibrations of astral matter (or elemental essence). As an example, she refers to putting sand on a sound plate and then vibrating the plate -- the sand will create regular patterns. Vibrations in astral matter, of course, produce astral sound as well as form. As they move through astral space, they strike other thought-forms, setting up additional vibrations. Such vibrations, perhaps, produce the music of the spheres, or the ringing cosmos, or a symphony or poem.

In any event, the shape of these thought-forms is fluid and easily modified. When they assume shape, the thought-forms also take color from the generating emotion or intellectual thought. Thus different colors are associated with different emotions, different vibrations/sounds, and different shapes. It is remarkably synaesthetic.

Belyi's novel *Petersburg*, published in 1912, shortly after Scriabin's "Prometheus, The Poem of Fire," offers a good example. "An astral entity will change his whole appearance with the most startling rapidity," Mrs. Besant explains, "for astral matter takes form under every impulse of thought, the life swiftly remoulding the form to give itself new expression."⁹ And this is one reason why characters in Belyi's novel constantly change into other people: the Semitic Mongol - the student Lipensky - Lippanchenko - the "black-hearted" Mavrokordato; Shishnarfiiev - Shishnarfiie - Enfranshish; Voronkov - Morkovin; the Bronze Horseman - the Dutchman - the sailor - the Bronze Guest; why metaphors are realized and why slippers and wallpaper come alive and suitcases reshape themselves. They are all astral entities, constantly being molded and remolded on the astral plane by the thoughts of Russians. These thought-forms, once in existence, can then influence events and people on the physical plane.

8 H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 1 (New York: 1877), p.62.

Classic example: Consider Mme. Blavatsky's observation, a basic tenet of Theosophy, in connection with Belyi's novel *Peterburg*, where characters are willed into existence not only by the author, but even by other characters (as the Senator wills Dudkin into being with his "cerebral play," and Dudkin goes out and has thoughts of his own). The works of the period contain many such occult references.

9 Mrs. Annie Besant, *Man and His Bodies* (1896; Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1975), 39.

The same may be said of colors. In *Petersburg*, the Theosophical colors determine the novel's color imagery: the bright yellow of pure intellect is associated with the abstractly intellectual Senator Ableukhov and his house, for example; while the green waters of the Neva signal the selfishness and deceit that characterize the city. Red anger, grey malice, black hatred all have their own codes in the novel.

These color codes are not accidental. The Theosophical color schemes had been presented earlier in Mrs. Besant's *Ancient Wisdom*, but *Thought-Forms* lavishly illustrated the concept in vibrant Theosophical color. Widely available and advertised, *Thought Forms* was closely read by the avant-garde art community. Kandinsky owned the 1908 German translation and familiarized himself with it before publishing his own major essay, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. In Russia Theosophists and occultists read it in English, in German, or in the popular and frequently reprinted Russian paraphrase of Elena Pisareva.

Scriabin's uses of sound and color (in the famous "light organ," for example, which was to accompany the performance of certain musical works) parallels Belyi's "color orchestration" in his novel. The colors, coupled with the music of the cosmos, were capable of evoking a symphony of emotions and states in the hearer/listener that raised him above the murky, muddy colors of the material earth and into the azure and gold of divine spirit.

Aleksandr Scriabin's interest in Theosophy was by no means an aberration in the circles in which he traveled. His interest was a manifestation of a larger spiritual crisis, the crisis of culture and consciousness of his age, and our deeper knowledge and appropriate understanding of the period of intense spiritual searching in which he lived can only offer us new interpretive possibilities and help us better to appreciate his striving and his life's work.