

Suggested Repertoire by Alexander Skryabin (1872–1915)

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for the participants of UVic Summer Piano 2024

Section I: Shorter works of moderate difficulty

Almost none of Skryabin's piano music is "easy," but many superb shorter works fall within the grasp of a serious amateur pianist.

A. Youthful works of Moscow Conservatory years

1. Etude in c#, op. 2, no. 1 (1887):

A gem by the fifteen-year-old composer, it is also one of his best-known works. It is a study in lyrical playing, voicing, tone, and legato left-hand.

2. From 12 Etudes, op. 8 (1894–95):

This set is perhaps the finest work of his youth. Suggested choices are:

Lento no. 8 in D flat: *Written for his first love, Natalia Sekarina, this lovely, lyrical character-piece frequently appeared in Skryabin's recital programs throughout his life.*

Andante cantabile no. 11 in b flat: *A brooding Slavic song with varied reprise, it features a throbbing accompaniment and right-hand melody in octaves. To play it comfortably you should have reliable reach of a ninth in the right hand.*

Patetico no. 12 in g#: *Perhaps Skryabin's best known piano work, this passionate "revolutionary" etude became an emblem for the Russian struggle for political independence under the last Tsar. Requires strong chords and octaves in both hands and epic sweep.*

3. Prelude in c# for the left hand alone, op. 9, no. 1 (1894):

It was written in the wake of Skryabin's right-hand injury in his final year at the Moscow Conservatory. Envious of fellow student Josef Lhévinne's monumental technique, he over-practised Liszt's 'Don Juan' Fantasy in preparation for his graduation examination (he stubbornly played it nevertheless, and won the gold medal). The resulting hand injury and arm pain recurred periodically throughout his life. This beautiful prelude does not sound difficult, but requires careful voicing, pedaling, fingering, and legato playing.

B. Skryabin's first period: Early maturity (1895–1902)

1. 24 Preludes, op. 11 (1888–96):

Skryabin embarked on his first European tours as pianist-composer in 1895–96. Among the gems of this period are forty-nine Preludes for piano, each dated with place of composition and written as a sort of travel journal (although few are from his earlier

years). Published on his return by the Russian firm of Belaieff, they appear as op. 11 (24 preludes), op. 13 (6), op. 15 (5), op. 16 (5), and op. 17 (7). The strongest collection was assembled as the 24 Preludes op. 11, like Chopin's Preludes organized in all twenty-four major and minor keys. Most of the op. 11 Preludes are short and make moderate technical demands on the pianist. You could choose several from across the collection, for example nos. 1, 3, and 21, which are interesting studies in cross-meters. You could also select one of the four Parts of six works each: for example, Part 2 (nos. 7–12) makes an especially attractive grouping without excessive technical demands.

2. Four Preludes, op. 22 (1897–98):

An engaging set of four short, playable pieces in Skryabin's early decorative piano style, these would make a compact and appealing grouping on a recital program.

C. Skryabin's second period: Maturity and early modernism (1903–09)

The year 1903 initiated a sudden outpouring of outstanding, original piano music in an increasingly modernist style, beginning with the difficult Sonata no. 4, op. 30. Among them is an important new genre, the *Poème*, which alternates with Preludes, Etudes, and other short pieces in the published collections for the rest of his career. In the works of these six years Skryabin's strikingly original voice as a composer for the piano emerges fully formed. By the close of this period, the two Pieces op. 57 (1908), Skryabin is on the verge of abandoning the tonal center and embracing a modernist style of sumptuous chromatic decadence.

Several works of this period are major masterpieces of advanced technical difficulty, and accordingly appear in Section II below (see p. 4). More approachable technically if still musically demanding are the following:

1. From Four Preludes, op. 31 (1903), no. 1, *Andante* in D flat, and no. 4, *Lento* in C:

The Andante is a poetic prelude that features cross meters and displaced downbeats in the left hand supporting a fresh cantabile melody; the Lento is a brief fragment of bewitching chromatic chords that suggest Russian Orthodox choral music.

2. From Preludes, op. 35 (1903), no. 2, *Elevato* in B flat:

It features advanced chromatic harmony.

3. From Preludes, op. 37 (1903), no. 1, *Mesto* in B flat:

A lovely piece in 9/8 highlighting the flexibility of the left hand for which Skryabin the pianist was renowned.

4. *Poème*, op. 41 in D flat (1903):

A poetic masterpiece, both substantial musically and grateful technically, it requires careful pedaling and voicing of the active left hand, especially in the murmuring triplet accompaniment in the varied reprise of the opening theme.

5. Feuillet d'album [Albumleaf], from *Trois Morceaux*, op. 45, no. 1 (1905):
This short love-song is relatively undemanding technically, but requires very flexible handling of rubato and tempo adjustments. Skryabin's motion toward a more modern style is evident in its ambiguous close.

6. *Four Morceaux* [Pieces], op. 51 (1906):
Skryabin's use of poetic titles signals a move toward his final period, when such suggestive titles abound. This attractive set of short pieces is among the more challenging sets of this group. They can be played singly or as a set.

"Fragilité," no. 1, is a study in delicacy and two-against-three motion. The left hand presents the wistful melody while the right hand accompanies with quick but quiet chord changes that require precision, agility, and subtlety.

*"Prélude," no. 2, with its mysterious character indication of *Lugubre*, features frequent shifts of hand position that must be carefully fingered.*

"Poème ailé" (Winged poem), no. 3, may have been a distorted commentary on Schumann's "Prophet Bird," and like the latter features fast flourishes as light as a feather. The tempos also fluctuate as freely and flexibly as a bird in flight.

The offset rhythms of "Danse languide," no. 4, require careful counting to convey the playful hesitations and jagged motions of this cockeyed dance.

7. *Three Morceaux*, op. 52 (1905–07): *Poème, Énigme, Poème languide*:
Although rather short, these three pieces make substantial demands on the player, making this one of the most demanding sets in this group. Yet the difficulties are not primarily technical. All three explore the vague state of "languor," which Skryabin considered to be the first stage of the creative process.

"Poème," no. 1 (1907) is a study in disciplined freedom that should be played "languorously, as if veiled." It presents a short theme with seven loose variations played continuously, without breaks. This mysterious poem changes meter in every measure, enhanced by multiple tempo shifts and cross-rhythms, which provide the player with cues for achieving the flexibility for which Skryabin was known.

"Énigme," no. 2 (1907) richly deserves its title, alternating languorous melodic gestures with mocking asides. Its "voluptuous, bewitched" middle section is a mysterious song. "Énigme" is also Skryabin's first piece to end without a tonal resolution, simply evaporating into thin air.

"Poème languide," no. 3 (1905): Although barely a minute long and "not fast," this tricky piece in 9/8 is a study in the layering of contrasting fragments that will challenge your counting skills.

8. *Nuances*, op. 56, no. 3 (1908):
Technically fairly easy, this delectable little piece bears the unusual gastronomic indication "Fondu, velouté," or "meltingly smooth."

9. *Deux Morceaux*, op. 57 (1908), "Désir" and "Caresse dansée":
Two short and playable pieces that capture the sensual movements of early modern dance in a highly chromatic style. Skryabin had long considered desire to be his

“element.” Careful fingering, strategic lingering, and effortless chordal sweeps will produce a sinuous, continuous line.

D. Skryabin’s Final Period: Modernism (1910–15)

Skryabin’s final works are for the most part extremely difficult both technically and musically, but there are some exceptions:

1. Feuillet d’album [Albumleaf], op. 58 (1911?):

A path-breaking work in Skryabin’s break with tonality.

2. Masque, from 2 Poèmes, op. 63 (1912):

The “masked ball” was a popular image of the time, with its occasions for secrecy and role-playing. The player must capture the “concealed sweetness” of Skryabin’s ambiguous indication at the start of this relatively easy piece.

3. Poème, op. 71, no. 2 (1913):

Its character indication, “En rêvant, avec une grande douceur,” defines the challenge of playing this nocturne “as if dreaming, with great sweetness/quietness.” It also features the serenity and high trills of the Tenth Sonata without its transcendental difficulty.

Section II: Major virtuoso works of advanced difficulty

A. Skryabin’s first period: Early maturity (1895–1902)

Sonata No. 2 in g#, op. 19 “Fantaisie-Sonata” (1892–97):

This freely improvisatory two-movement sonata is appropriately titled “Sonata-Fantaisie.” The ravishing first movement, composed in 1897, reminded Skryabin of “the quiet of a southern night on the seashore,” while for him the lightning-quick second movement from 1892 depicted a violent storm at sea. In spite of the six-year gap, they fit together convincingly. The participant could present only the first movement, leaving the very difficult second movement for later study.

Piano Concerto in f#, op. 20 (1896–97):

Skryabin’s only piano concerto is a truly lovely work composed during the active touring years as a professional pianist following his graduation from the Moscow Conservatory. Like the Grieg piano concerto, this three-movement concerto avoids heroic bluster in favor of more delicate colours, lyrical themes, and pianistic poetry. It has been recorded by numerous major pianists in the last several decades, including Anatol Ugorski, Yevgeny Sudbin, and Daniil Trifonov. Any one of its movements would make a fine class presentation.

Sonata no. 3 in f#, op. 23 (1897–98):

The Third Sonata is considered by many as the pinnacle of Skryabin's early maturity. He originally subtitled it "États d'âme" or "states of the soul," and in some early performances by the composer was accompanied by a detailed program concerning the heroic struggles and ultimate destruction of a suffering individual. One of the greatest post-Brahmsian piano sonatas in the classic four-movement design, it is both an impressively cohesive work and an outpouring of grand passions, noble themes, and dramatic pianism.

B. Skryabin's second period: Maturity and early modernism (1903–09)

1. Two Poèmes, op. 32 no. 1 in F#, no. 2 in D (1903):

No. 1 is Skryabin's first piano poem and is also one of his most often played works. A quiet work of subtle erotic allure, it is also an effective study in rhythm, rubato, and voicing.

No. 2 is a spacious, epic work that, depending on interpretation, can evoke either heroic romanticism or brutal realism.

If played as a pair, these two contrasting poems suggest a primal duality, such as between introversion and extroversion or delicacy and power.

2. Poème tragique, op. 34 (1903):

A warm and rich epic work of intermediate length, it would make a satisfying close to a recital. The virtuoso variation of the main theme at the close of the work is especially difficult.

3. Poème satanique, op. 36 (1903):

This is the most Lisztian of Skryabin's major works. And like Liszt's Mephisto, this Satan is a master of irony capable of playing the ardent lover before destroying the illusion in a dry cackle of laughter. He hides his true nature under a veil of seductive charm and playfulness until the last measures of the piece, an explosion of destructive power that captures the essence of Goethe's Mephisto, "the eternal spirit of nihilism." The diametrically contrasting Tragic and Satanic poems could be effectively paired in concert.

4. Etude, op. 42, no. 3 (1903):

A miniature but demanding study in measured trills for both hands. Its shimmering colours suggest the uncanny electronic voice of the Theremin, producing shivers in the listener.

5. Sonata no. 5, op. 53 (1907):

This is surely one of Skryabin's greatest Sonatas, an extremely difficult masterpiece in a single movement. It is preceded by a short quotation from Skryabin's The Poem of Ecstasy, the poetic text that also inspired his Symphony no. 4 and which supplies a key to its mysterious contents. Inspired by the composer's interest in Theosophy, the Fifth Sonata explores the triumphant emergence of the flame of creativity from the darkness of chaos. Although written in a frenzy of inspiration over only six days, it is remarkably well

constructed in an expanded sonata form featuring a slow introduction, two major themes, a huge development section, and a coda of terrifying power.

C. Skryabin's final period: Modernism "Toward the flame" (1910–15)

Skryabin continued with the Preludes, Poèmes, and Etudes of his earlier periods, but focused especially on the Sonata in his last years, producing five major sonatas during this time. Most impressive is his magnificent final trilogy of 1912–13 (nos. 8–10), which are related both musically and philosophically. All these works are chromatic to the point of atonality; indeed, Skryabin eliminated the use of key signatures in all these works, preferring to add accidentals liberally as needed. This is music of nature, of night, of unconscious dreams, and of the spheres.

1. *Étrangeté* [Strangeness], op. 63 no. 2 (1912):

This playful poème must be performed very quietly, with "grace" and "delicacy," interrupted by flashes of lightning-quick arabesques of "sudden strangeness." The player must aspire to Skryabin's famous speed and delicacy of touch.

2. Three Etudes, op. 65 (1912):

Not unlike Debussy's late Etudes of 1915, Skryabin's final set of etudes deals with abstract musical issues, here the intervals of the major ninth, the major seventh, and the perfect fifth respectively. And like Debussy's, they provide "a warning to pianists not to take up the musical profession unless they have remarkable hands." But in case this makes them seem dry and academic, the Etudes op. 65 are as poetic and sonorously pianistic as Chopin's.

3. Sonata no. 8, op. 66 (1913):

This luminous sonata in one movement is the longest of his late works, notable for its lucid organization that, according to the composer, "bridges the visible and the invisible." Beginning with a spacious introduction "orchestrated" for solo piano across three or four staves, the sonata promises a work of rich textures and meditative depth. The five themes exposed here are often said to represent the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, and a fifth, the aether. The exposition presents two major themes that seem to project the duality of existence. The uplifting opening theme, notable for its striving rising seconds, shimmering cascades of fourths, and high trills, seems to evoke joyful impressions of the visible world of nature. The second theme, marked "Tragique," may allude to the darkness of the invisible world of the individual. Skryabin considered it to be one of the darkest episodes in his music.

4. Sonata no. 9, op. 68, "Black Mass" (1913):

Although Skryabin did not supply this familiar nickname, he approved it as an apt reflection of the Satanic atmosphere of this one-movement work. Most notable is its progressive rise in speed and tension in the second half, leading to a grotesque march that the composer described as a "parade of the forces of evil."

5. Sonata no. 10, op. 70 (1913):

Unlike the previous sonata, this one is all light and bliss. Skryabin described it as “bright, joyful, earthy” and seemed to have associated it with the forests around the country estate where it was written. Bird-calls and insect sounds abound in its trills, tremolos, and flitting figurations, ending with an ecstatic dance full of mysterious revelations.

6. Two Dances, op. 73, no. 1: “Guirlandes” (Garlands); no. 2 “Flammes sombres” (1914):

“Guirlandes” proves that, even when it looks relatively easy on the page, Skryabin’s late music is very challenging to interpret. In this case, capturing its delicate colours and “languishing grace” will not come without careful work and attention to detail. Skryabin wrote to a friend that it evoked for him a crystalline image of “sweetness, to the point of pain,” depicting “iridescent figures which grew, formed groups and, refined and ethereal, burst and palpitated, in order to grow and arise anew.” It surely references the recent craze for modern dance in the antique style by Isadora Duncan and others, with robed women in stylized poses, often bearing garlands of flowers.

Far more sinister is “Dark Flames,” a shorter and more manageable counterpart to the hugely difficult “Poème vers la flamme,” op. 72. Associated with the “Song-dance of the Fallen” from Skryabin’s text to the Mysterium, on which he was working at the time, “Flammes sombres” depicts in the composer’s words, “the border of the path of black magic ... here the eroticism is already unhealthy, a perversion, and afterwards an orgiastic dance ... over corpses.”

7. Five Preludes, op. 74 (1914):

Skryabin’s last completed publication, this enigmatic set reveals the bold new paths that the composer might have explored had he lived beyond 1915. Contemplative, slow, vague, mournful, and finally war-like, it seems like a series of steps into the unknown. Some important building blocks of what will be post-war music are evident, including atonal ostinatos, harmonies in ninths, chromatic rows, and dissonant counterpoint. Only the fifth piece offers significant technical difficulties, but challenging complexities of rhythm, voicing, dynamics, and phrasing abound.

Enjoy discovering this wealth of piano music! Many outstanding performances are available online by numerous pianists noted for their Skryabin interpretations, including among many others Vladimir Sofronitsky, Heinrich Neuhaus, Sviatoslav Richter, Vladimir Horowitz, Anatol Ugorski, Dmitri Alexeev, Daniil Trifonov – and piano rolls by Skryabin himself.

Other suggested works before 1917

Sergey Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Sonata no. 2, op. 14 (1912)

Piano Concerto no. 1, op. 10 (1911–12)

Toccata in d, op. 11 (1912)

Sarcasms, op. 17 (1912–14), *five pieces of advanced difficulty*

Visions fugitives, op. 22, 20 pieces (1915–17): *Unlike the very difficult previous works, this lovely collection includes a broad span of difficulty levels, including many accessible works of intermediate difficulty.*

Serge Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Piano Concerto no. 2 in c, op. 18 (1900–01)

Preludes, op. 23 (1903)

Preludes, op. 32 (1910)

Etudes-tableaux, op. 33 and 39 (1916–17)