

Music

Taste the Rainbow

YSO gets psychedelic with a historically-informed performance

By Daniel Stephen Johnson

Yale Symphony Orchestra

8 p.m., Feb. 13. Woolsey Hall, Yale University, 500 College St. Free. \$10. 203-562-5666, shubert.com.

Alexander Scriabin could never be accused of being too modest in his ambitions. The work he had begun at the time of his death, *Mysterium*, was supposed to have been a week-long performance incorporating not only music and dance but smells, colored lights and even tactile sensations, presented in a Himalayan temple. It is only by comparison with the unfinished *Mysterium* that his final completed work, *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*, might seem less than ambitious, calling for only a full symphony orchestra, piano, organ, optional choir and colored lights.

It goes without saying, perhaps, that most performances of *Prometheus* in the century since its composition generally forgo the light show, which was left out even at the premiere performance. But this Saturday, Feb. 13, the Yale Symphony Orchestra will revive the piece with full razzle-dazzle, along with Strauss' epic *Ein Heldenleben* and the premiere of a new work by undergrad Daniel Schlosberg.

This will not be the first time the Symphony has given Scriabin the Pink Floyd treatment he intended: the Yale Symphony Orchestra performed the work with full lighting effects, but advances in both suggest Saturday's performance, under the baton of Toshiyuki Shimada, may be the most faithful re-creation of the original scheme.

I e-mailed Anna Gawboy, a scholar in the Yale Music Department whose work informs this new performance. She wrote down what he wanted the lights to look like in a first edition of the score. This manuscript was in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. It contains directions for blazes of color, tongues of flame, fireworks, and more. It existed only in Scriabin's mind, and never could have been realized with early 20th century lighting technology.

In the lead-up to the 1911 premiere of *Prometheus*, Scriabin rejected as inadequate the tastiera per organo, the key difference between that contraption and the organ of lights used in the present performance – YSO's previous efforts – is the use of vastly more responsive LED technology. LEDs, unlike conventional incandescent lights, can produce the dynamic effects called for in Scriabin's recently unearthed notations, but also do so in perfect synchrony with the music.

The synchrony achieved by the Yale Symphony's LED system, designed by Justin Townsend, is in a way the heart of the work: "as a 'symphony of sound' counterpointed by a 'symphony of light,'" explains Gawboy, in addition to matching the mood of the music, Scriabin actually devised a system of correspondence between light and sound: chromatic shades. Each color, projected from a wheel of light at the front of the auditorium, will have a specific relationship to his tonal materials. Meanwhile, a second set of lights will change much more slowly than the first, in relationship to the piece's large-scale form.



A hundred years ago, the precise reproduction of these effects was something of a science fiction, loftiest dreamers. In Gawboy's words, "Scriabin believed," quite literally, "that art could change re:

But 2010, she notes, "is the future of the past. Now we are capable of realizing Scriabin's vision." S imaginary work from 1910 to life" – and very soon, they will.

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