

From Wireless Imagination
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KUBLIN, THEORIST OF SYNESTHESIA

Nikolai Kublin (1868–1917) occupied a special place in the cross fire of avant-garde movements in prerevolutionary Russia. A professor at the St. Petersburg Military Academy and a doctor to the Russian general staff with civilian rank equivalent to a major general, Kublin taught himself painting and writing relatively late in life. Beginning in 1908, the forty-year-old Kublin enthusiastically became involved with various post-Symbolist and Futurist splinter groups, organizing major art exhibitions and funding several important publications. His generosity to Russian artists was legendary. In fact, Kublin had an irritating habit of considering practically any member of an avant-garde group an absolute genius. In January 1914, Kublin warmly welcomed F. T. Marinetti, the megalomaniacal leader of the Italian Futurists, to Moscow while Kublin's younger compatriots were somewhat less than gracious to their Western European counterpart. In addition to his experimental graphic and poetic activities, Kublin, with Nikolai Evreinov, founded the infamous Stray Dog cabaret, the chief haunt of Moscow's Bohemian set.

Kublin's promotion of microtonic music and abstract sound manifested itself at every turn in his artistic career. As early as 1910, Kublin militated for the abolition of staves—to be replaced by “colored music” notation and quarter tones. Like Kandinsky, he was under the influence of the St. Petersburg theosophist, Aleksandra Unkovskaya. Music, as he later wrote in *The Blue Rider Almanac*, had its own independent power and should remain as “free” as the everyday sounds in nature.⁴ If permitted, this new, “anarchistic” music, floating outside the standard reaches of the five-line scale, could greatly enlarge the composer's vocabulary. Moreover, Kublin called for musical compositions that utilized quarter and eighth tones. Although no contemporary instruments could easily play quarter tones, and eighth tones were nearly inaudible to the human ear,

Kublin praised their qualities as carriers of dissonant tunes and as lyrical “strings” to the listener’s soul. Kublin even suggested the construction of new instrument boards in the piano, doubling the string and keyboard sections while reducing the number of octaves, and the creation of homemade xylophones.

A tireless supporter of Futurism, Kublin wrote a word-sound manifesto, “What Is the Word?”⁵ in which he borrowed from the French symbolists and the theosophists to devise the beginnings of his own synesthetic alphabet. While declaring that every vowel has its own special pitch, he assigned colors to the hard consonants. Previously, Kublin had lectured on the relationships between thought patterns (or universal symbols), graphic images, odors, and tastes. (Like many theosophists, he had a special affinity for the triangle.) But the “Word” manifesto signaled a high point in Kublin’s career. Between 1915 and 1917, as Russian Futurism dissolved into bickering factions, Kublin, in his final years, suffered frequent ridicule and sardonic abuse from his former poet-colleagues.

Nikolai Kublin’s Sound-Color Symbology

Phoneme	Color	Theosophical Color Meaning
G	Yellow-Black	Selfishness
K	Black	Hate
Kh	Gray	Fear
R	Red	Sensuality
S	Blue	Spirit
Z	Green	Transformation
Zh	Yellow	Intelligence

Source: Compiled from the 1914 manifesto by Nikolai Kublin, “What Is the Word?” in *Charters and Declarations of Russian Futurists*; and C. W. Leadbeater, *Man: Visible and Invisible* (London: Theosophic Society Press, 1902).

SCRIABIN, VISIONARY AND SCRIBE OF THE WORLD’S END

The preeminent Russian composer of the early twentieth century, Aleksandr Scriabin (1872–1915) and his works

were long associated with occult symbolism and theosophical art. A brilliant pianist who was strongly influenced by the works of Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner, Scriabin began creating complex and lyrical keyboard compositions in the 1890s. His early Nietzschean idealism, however, by the time of the 1905 revolution, gave way to Madame Blavatsky’s pan-Aryan “Timeless Wisdom” and the apocalyptic Slavic prophecies of Vladimir Soloviev. To be sure, Scriabin’s fragile mental health and childish temperament were more suited to the pessimistic end-of-the-world preachings of the Nikolai II era than the philosophy-based neoromanticism movement that inspired central European artists.

After the turn of the century, Scriabin left Russia for a total of six years in search of new musical venues and freedom from his nominal family responsibilities. There were other reasons as well. His growing egocentricity began to manifest itself in pronounced and disturbing ways: Scriabin not only referred to himself in the third person, like a member of royalty, but he also started to think of himself as the primal man incarnate and then as the primal creator—God. In Brussels, just before 1905, Scriabin discovered the writings of Madame Blavatsky, the founder and central figure of the international Theosophical Society, which quickly became the major influence in his personal and artistic life.

Theosophy was the first and most lasting nineteenth-century attempt to bridge esoteric Western and Eastern religious teachings into a single doctrine. The invention of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (or H. P. B.), a remarkable conwoman from a mixed Russian and British background, theosophy grew into a full-fledged occult religion by the 1880s. Although poorly educated, Blavatsky managed to carefully weave neo-Platonic texts and indigenous American spiritualism to a tapestry of traditional Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Many important Western artists and writers, such as Maurice Maeterlinck and William Butler Yeats, found themselves attracted to theosophy’s ritual use of universal symbology and homeopathic magic

in their ceremonies and writings. In addition, synesthesia, the invisible attachment of one physiological sensation with another, H. P. B. proclaimed, was divinely ordained. At centers in Madras, New York, London, and Paris, theosophists actively investigated hidden relationships between the seven bodily senses and their corresponding astral planes.

For Scriabin, theosophy magically resolved the most pressing and personal dilemmas in his conflicted life. Before 1905, Scriabin felt that he could write any kind of music, but the motivation was always purely artistic. Now his modernistic, difficult compositions could generate something other than praise or mad controversy. Scriabin would be the revealer, the vehicle, the supreme commander for a great superhuman enterprise: *The Mysterium*, an initiation rite of hallucinatory music that would instantly transform humanity. It was the ultimate theosophical dream.

Despite a total obsession with the project, long stretches of time passed before Scriabin began actual work on *The Mysterium*. In 1908, he completed his *Poem of Ecstasy*, a lushly harmonious "tone poem" that found wide approval among aficionados in New York, where it premiered, and more feverish enthusiasm in Moscow and St. Petersburg. (When the Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, was catapulted into space in 1961, the *Poem of Ecstasy* became the first earthly music ever broadcast from outer space.)

Completed in 1910, Scriabin's fourth symphony, *Prometheus: A Poem of Fire*, brought him closer still to the theosophical world of *Prometheus*. A product of a synesthetic fusion of the senses, *Prometheus* was written to be accompanied with a "light keyboard," that projected colored images according to Scriabin's intuitive music-color code. Even the music was otherworldly. The symphony began with a variant of Scriabin's idomatic "Mystic Chord," a chord that consisted of superposed fourths and that allowed him to dissolve any normative time sense. Although the first *Prometheus* concert in Moscow was performed without the colored projections in 1911, the symphony soon became totally identified with the patented color

organ. Constructed by Aleksandr Mozer, the simple apparatus unveiled only one or two colors at a time, and these changed very slowly, usually fixed to *Prometheus'* pitch or double-horn line, rather than to the individual notes in the total orchestra.

Scriabin's Music-Color Symbology for
Prometheus and the "Prefatory Action" of *The Mysterium*

Musical note	Color	Feeling/Image
C	Red	Human Will
C#	Violet	Will of Creative Spirit
D	Yellow	Joy
D#	Steel	Mankind
E	Frost to Moon-color	Dreams
F	Dark Red	Differentiation of Will
F#	Navy Blue	Creativity
G	Orange-Pink	Play
G#	Purple	Descent of Spirit into Matter
A	Green	Materialism
A#	Steel	Ravishment
B	Sky Blue	Dreams

Source: Compiled from Leonid Sabaneiev's chart in *Musik* (January 1911), p. 199, as cited in Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds., *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, ed. Klaus Lankheit (1912; reprint, New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 131; and from Fabian Bowers, *Scriabin*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Kodansha International Limited, 1969), p. 205.

Scriabin's ultimate project, *The Mysterium*, was never finished although some twelve years were invested in it. The extant sketches, called the "Prefatory Action," and private notebook entries, mostly written in 1914 and 1915, give some notion of Scriabin's grandiose and expansive intentions. Every occult musical idea from the ancient Eleusinian Rites to Meister Eckhart to Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine somehow found a place in *The Mysterium*. Like Kandinsky, Scriabin experimented with the correspondences among human movement, color, and sound. While he completed a choral text in simple Russian, he dreamed of incorporating Sanskrit words, unintelligible shouts and cries, as well as the sounds of yogic aspiration.

Suspended from clouds high over the Himalayas, Russian bells would beckon spectators from the world over to *The Mysterium*. After six days and twelve hours of prophetic art, including poetic dialogues, fire festivities, supernatural music, rhythmic dancing (performed by the orchestral members), nonmatrixed mime (where the actors do not assume characters), perfume and incense burning, tactile displays, color and light fountains, and audience participation, Scriabin would declare that a new race of men would be propagated. (Earlier, Scriabin prophesied the entire world would come to an end through "physical shocks of sound power.") Standing at the altar of his universal temple, shaped like a globe with twelve columns (all reflected in a semicircular pool), Scriabin the musician, the conductor, the high priest would transform man and nature, male and female, brother and brother into an ectoplasmic unity. A kind of death experience would blend all mankind into a single mass illuminated by the "ecstatic abyss of sunshine." Seared of their earthly garments and almost dematerialized, the spectators would rediscover their innate "sonhood" as their father, Scriabin, would lead them into an ineffable understanding of ultimate life and death.

In 1914, Scriabin welcomed the world war as a physical manifestation of his cataclysmic beliefs. Yet, suffering from the rapid devastation of a septic carbuncle, Scriabin himself was the one to be spiritually transported to another astral plane. On 27 April 1915, after months of musical work on his "Prefatory Action," interrupted by a series of medical operations, Scriabin, the visionary composer, died.