

The Transcriber's Art - #45
Richard Yates
Alexander Scriabin

You don't have to suffer to be a poet; adolescence is enough suffering for anyone. –
John Ciardi

You are seventeen years old and have been in the military academy for six years. Because you are quite small and frail the other cadets make fun of you. Your mentor thinks you are lazy. You ignored a critical assignment and failed counterpoint class so there is no chance for a conservatory diploma in composition. You might try to become a concert pianist, but your hands are so tiny they barely reach an octave and, in addition, you damaged one of them in a foolish attempt to compete with a classmate. Your prospects just do not seem very promising.

What to do? Well, if you are Alexander Scriabin, you will keep composing, get some pieces published, and in a few years you will be one of the most innovative composers and theorists in the history of music.

In the midst of his adolescent angst, Scriabin found an affinity for – and likely comfort in – the music of the composer with whom he had the most in common, physically and temperamentally—Frédéric Chopin. One biographer notes that he even slept with Chopin's music under his pillow. Chopin had extended tonal harmony to a historical apex and Scriabin absorbed it completely while still a teenager. Although later, in the second phase of his career, he developed strikingly idiosyncratic and original theories of harmony and methods of composition, the compositions before about 1903 show the profound influence of Chopin. All aspects of these early works reveal that inspiration: the melodic lyricism, forms, textures, harmonies, figuration, pianistic approaches, and genre. And there is no genre more closely associated with Chopin than the mazurka.

Mazurkas

The mazurka was originally a Polish folk dance in triple time with an accent on the second beat. As transformed and elevated by Chopin, it encompassed a wide variety of moods and tempos, but often embodied a wildness and a daring especially in its harmonic reach. Chopin seemed to use the mazurkas as a laboratory for harmonic experiments. The result is often far removed from the original folk genre, but this is a common fate of dance forms in the hands of pioneering composers.

Of Chopin's works, the mazurkas may be the type most amenable for transcription for the guitar. Stephen Aron discusses their qualities in terms of transcription in *The Complete Chopin Mazurkas* (Mel Bay Publications, 2001). This collection of guitar transcriptions of all 51 mazurkas is an impressive achievement and a source of excellent music for guitarists with a wide range of abilities. The volume is also a valuable resource and example for transcribers because Aron explicitly lays out and discusses the constraints that he set for himself as he adapted the piano scores.

Scriabin's Mazurka, Op. 3, No. 5

While studying, and at times struggling, at the Moscow Conservatory in 1888, Scriabin composed the ten Mazurkas, Op. 3 and they were published the next year. Pianist Yevgeny Sudbin writes that they "...show Scriabin's most poetic and innocently charming qualities—a rare combination and one seldom encountered in his later works." The fifth of these mazurkas was particularly well-suited for the guitar. Given Scriabin's contemporaneous conflicts with his counterpoint teacher, there is irony in the opening measures in close, imitative texture. Certainly no Polish folk mazurka ever began like this, but the idea may have its source in a Chopin mazurka that was undoubtedly familiar to Scriabin. Chopin's mazurka, Op. 50, No. 3 in C sharp minor begins in a very similar manner (here transposed to D minor for easier comparison):

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

The transcription accompanying this article is probably on the higher side of difficulty for this series, but some of this is due to the less than idiomatic harmonic language and eases with familiarity. I have fingered it more heavily to help guide the way. While *Doloroso* is not a standard tempo, it certainly must be a slow one, and invites considerable stretching and lingering.

Other Scriabin pieces for transcription

Many of Scriabin's early works bear perusal as possible guitar transcriptions. In particular, his several collections of preludes Op. 13, 15, 16, 17, and 22 are worth looking at. Beyond these opus numbers, however, caution is warranted. Scriabin's unique formulations of harmony and voice leading preclude the use of simple rules for reduction to fit the guitar that work for most of the common practice period. He developed his own systems for chord structure that he never fully explained and which have provoked musicologists to endless, and not always consistent, analysis.

Please send any comments or suggestions to:

Richard Yates
richard@yatesguitar.com
<http://www.yatesguitar.com>

The image displays a musical score for Chopin's Mazurka, Op. 50, No. 3. It consists of two staves of music. The top staff is the right-hand part, and the bottom staff is the left-hand part. The music is written in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and accidentals. The piece is characterized by its distinctive mazurka rhythm and melodic lines.

Chopin, Mazurka, Op. 50, No. 3

Prelude

Op. 22, No. 11

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Alexander Scriabin
(1872-1915)

Lento

⑥ = D

p rubato

pp

accel. cresc. accel.

accel. f

ppp

a tempo rubato rit.

V

II

I—h

I₅—h h—I₂ II—III

VII V— III II