THE MYSTERIES OF SPIRIT: CROSS-CURRENTS IN RUSSIAN MODERNISM
(ALEXANDER SCRIBIN & NIKOLAI SHPERLING)
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Introduction

In his preface to the groundbreaking series of Modernist Studies *Border Crossings*, the author Daniel Albright highlights “the need for comparisons among the arts” in the following terms:

“To study one artistic medium in isolation from others is a study in inadequacy. The twentieth century, so rich in literature, in music, and in the visual arts, has also been rich in criticism of these arts; but it’s possible that some of the uglinesses and distortions in modern criticism have arisen from the consideration of each artistic medium as an autonomous field of development, fenced off from other media. It is hard for us to believe, but when, long ago, Horace said *Ut pictura poesis* - the poem should be like a picture - he meant it.” ¹

A comparative analysis of the work of the composer Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915) and the graphic artist Nikolai Shperling (1881-1946) reveals that both men found inspiration in related sources. Resisting disciplinary boundaries throughout my research has enabled me to trace crosscurrents of influence in their work against the cultural and historical backdrop of the Russian Silver Age and developments in European Modernism more broadly. Further, examination of their contact with the Symbolist milieu has illuminated the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of their oeuvre and the spiritual motivation that lay behind it; given the markedly mystical approaches of both men, I have brought interdisciplinary scholarship to bear which looks at the intersection of esotericism and creativity and the underlying Theosophical context which unites them.

These connections are explored in the following materials which comprise my HTC senior professional project: I. A lecture-recital presented on January 12, 2017 at Ohio University’s School of Music Recital Hall entitled “The Mysteries of Spirit: Cross-Currents in

Russian Modernism (Alexander Scriabin & Nikolai Shperling) II. A follow-up paper presented on April 26, 2017 at the Scriabin Memorial Museum in Moscow that incorporates elements of the previous lecture in addition to findings from my research trip in Moscow in January-February of the same year.
I. Lecture-Recital Transcript

“The Mysteries of Spirit: Cross-Currents in Russian Modernism”
(Alexander Scriabin & Nikolai Shperling)²

[Slide 1]

Opening Remarks

[Performance: Scriabin’s Prelude Op. 67 No. 1] My name is Logan Cull. The music you have just heard (marked “vague” and “mysterious”) was composed by Alexander Scriabin shortly after he received as a gift this drawing done by one of the members of his inner-circle, the artist Nikolai Victorovitch Shperling [Slide 2]. The title of the work given by Shperling is “Восточный Мудрец” (“Oriental Sage”) but Scriabin, who prominently displayed it above the composition podium in his study where it still hangs today, would refer to as “Черный” (“Black”); and although he greatly admired the work of his friend, he confessed that its presence in his home took some time getting used to [Slide 3]. The Oriental Sage is one of a handful of works that are known to exist by Shperling, who is thought to have perished in WWI and about whom next to nothing is known, or at least, this has been the case until now.

While the exact date and circumstances of their meeting is unknown, we do know that they met sometime before Scriabin moved into his apartment on Nikolopeskovsky B. per., 11 just north of the Arbat district, which he rented from Apollon Grushka, a professor of philology at Moscow University, in the final years of his life from 1912 -1915 and where Shperling was a regular guest. A meeting ground for artists, poets, musicians, and philosophers of Russia’s Silver Age, later during the Soviet era it stood as a safe house for people who held alternative views, where the progressive avant-guard found a home to read and discuss banned literature,

² A video of the lecture-recital can be accessed here: https://youtu.be/oScotXIsDQI
and where Soviet electronic music was born. In 1922, it became a State Memorial Museum where it still operates today preserving the composer’s personal belongings and materials related to his reception throughout the twentieth century, while also functioning as a cultural center where concerts and other events are held.

This past September to commemorate the 135th anniversary of Shperling’s birth, an exhibition and lecture were given by the research team responsible for producing this book, which appeared earlier in the year [Slide 4]. The book presents newly discovered information pertaining to the artist’s life and work and is a joint effort of three scholars affiliated with the museum - Владимир Попков, Ксения Дубровина, and Оксана Санжарова - who I have been in communication with in anticipation of my upcoming trip to Moscow. I have received a Gilman award (sponsored by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs) and additional funding through the Honors Tutorial College to visit the Scriabin Memorial Museum in Moscow to examine materials in their archive related to both artists. I would like to take a moment to thank Dean Jeremy Webster and Cary Frith of the HTC for their generosity in helping fund this trip which is a little over a week away; Dr. Vladimir Marchenkov, Dr. Richard Wetzel and Professor André Gribou for their continued support and encouragement; finally, I would like to thank Olga Semukhina who purchased the book from the Museum’s gift shop last summer and brought it back as a gift.

In addition to sharing some of the recent findings of the team in Moscow, the talk I will be giving this evening is meant to serve as a preview of my own research. I will be pairing image and sound in a way that is not arbitrary but intended to help convey some of the ideas about the reciprocal relationship of music and visual art which I am exploring, a connection
which remains a rich area for research and further study. Let's begin with some biographical information. What do we know about the artists who produced these two works?

**Biography: N.V. Shperling (1881 - ?)**

Shperling’s name first appears in Leonid Sabaneev’s *Reminiscences* of Scriabin where he is described as a “bald young man with a mysteriously smiling face... interesting, strange, grim, distant, always immersed in some visionary state,” and his work is characterized as being similarly strange and incomprehensible.³ Sabaneev tells us that what the composer admired most in the artist was the “passionate erotic pathos of his religiosity,” which was “akin to his own,” and mentions their mutual affection for the “exotic and mystical East.”⁴ Shperling’s name does not appear in print again until Faubion Bowers’ English biography and follow-up companion volume *The New Scriabin: Enigma and Answers* wherein he makes a brief, but lasting impression:

> “Some members of Scriabin’s circle carried on ‘devilish’ experiments. Nikolai Shperling, the painter, while at the front shortly after the outbreak of World War I, drank the blood of the wounded and ate the flesh of soldiers freshly killed in action. All this was part of a spiritual exercise to study the effects on his soul. He told Scriabin about this, much to the composer’s morbid interest.”⁵

Since then, Bowers’ comment has appeared in a number of books, mostly studies of the Occult, and was referenced as recently as a 2015 retrospective piece published in Gramophone

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³ Сабанеев Л.Л. Воспоминания о Скрябине. М., 2014 С. 97.

⁴ Там же. С. 57-58.

by the English music critic Geoffrey Norris. Norris, when describing the artist of the “strangely haunting” Oriental Sage, offhandedly comments that he “is said to have drunk blood and eaten human flesh as an aid to mystical experience.” With this grim tale circulating around for half a century, his only claim to fame, it’s little wonder that Shperling has attracted virtually no attention from scholars. It may be the case that Bowers was privy to some inside information he uncovered during his research, but since he was notoriously prone to hyperbole and didn’t care to cite the source, I would strongly encourage you to take these charges of cannibalism with a grain of salt. The second issue that needs to be addressed is that Shperling was not really a painter per se, he was more of draftsman, although he did a few pastels (the Sage being one of them).

Thanks to efforts of the team of researchers in Moscow we now have accurate biographical information about Shperling’s life which I will now summarize for you: Nikolai Viktorovich Shperling was born on August 28, 1881 into a Russian-German family, one of three children to Nadezhda Mikhailovna and Victor Petrovich Shperling. His early childhood was spent in Crimea until his parents separated and Nadezhda took her two sons Sergei and Nikolai and daughter Maria to Moscow in the early 1890’s; Nadezhda was accidentally poisoned and died shortly after the move. As a child, Shperling studied with his brother and Alexander Fedorovich Kots (later founder of the Darwin Museum in Moscow) in the First Moscow Gymnasium. Around this time, he began taking private drawing lessons from Nikolai Norris, Geoffrey. Alexander Scriabin: The innovation and audacity of the Russian composer. Gramophone, 2016; See also Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal’s The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture (1997, pg. 126); Gary Lachman’s A Dark Muse: A History of the Occult (2009, pg. 145); Christopher Partridge’s The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane (2013, pg. 272).

Norris, ibid.
Avenirovich Martynov (1842-1913), who taught at the Moscow School of Painting. In 1900, Shperling enrolled in the History-Philology department of Moscow University and successfully defended a dissertation on "The Origin of the Slavophile Theory" in 1906. It was during this period that Shperling travelled abroad to visit the art galleries of Berlin, Vienna, Paris and Florence and became acquainted with the art of the modernist masters that would have a significant impact on his own work. In 1904, Shperling's studies were interrupted by army conscription. This is the earliest known photograph of the artist [Slide 5]. By March of 1905, he had attained the rank of corporal and by October of the same year, he had completed basic training. According to a registry, Shperling was residing in Moscow by 1909; this same registry also indicates that he was a professor at Marinskii College, a position which lasted less than a year. It is around this time, according to Sabaneev, that Shperling became acquainted with Scriabin; again, the exact circumstances are unknown.8

Like Scriabin, Shperling is an artist who defies easy classification. Stylistically, he does not seem to fit within any particular school or movement although his work does show the influence of some of them, e.g. Symbolism & Art Nouveau. He was a miniaturist who drew portraits of historical figures, myths, and legends. These portraits, despite being miniature in scale, contain enormous psychological depth and complexity, layers of meaning and intertextual references which are truly fascinating. Like most artists, you find certain idiosyncratic touches in his work. To demonstrate a basic trait - the aquiline ("roman") nose - let's look at a comparison of some figures over a period of roughly ten years [Slide 6].

8 Попков В., Дубровина К., Санжарова О. Скрябин и Современники: Материалы к биографии Н. В. Шперлинга 2016
Biography: A. N. Scriabin (1871-1915)

The events of Scriabin’s life, unlike those of Shperling’s, have been well documented. Scriabin was born on Christmas day in 1871. His mother was a concert pianist who died shortly after he was born, and his father - a foreign diplomat stationed in Turkey - remarried shortly thereafter; Scriabin was raised primarily by an aunt and grandmothers. After early training in the cadet corps., he continued his formal training as a concert pianist and composer at the Moscow Conservatory and graduated in 1892, at the age of 21 having attained the status of a “Free Artist.” It was around at this time that he developed an interest in philosophy and began what he would later refer to as a period of “self-analysis,” carefully recording his inner thought processes in secret notebooks. The publication in 1919 of the sixth volume of the Russkiye Propilei (“Materials for the History of Russian Thought and Literature.”) made these notebooks, which he kept under lock and key, available for public consumption.

After voluntarily resigning from teaching piano lessons at the Moscow Conservatory, a position he held from 1898 to 1903, he moved abroad with his mistress Tatyana de Shloezer, and dedicated his life to his music and philosophy. At this time, he transformed himself from a composer of mostly salon works into an artist-prophet in the Wagnerian mold, becoming a self-styled “Philosopher-Musician-Poet” (in that order), modeled after a character from an opera he never completed.

His move to Brussels in 1908 was key to the development of the next phase of his work. It is at this time that he conceives of his “main work,” which he later named the Mysterium. Central to his vision was the idea of synthesis - the desire for a more fully-integrated art form, incorporating all the sister arts into one amalgamated ritualized act that was supposed to take
place over the course of a week at the foot of the Himalayas. From this time on, he began to surround himself with people he felt could help him achieve this goal; his meetings with the symbolist poets Vyacheslav Ivanov, Jurgis Baltrusatis and Konstantine Balmont were to affect him profoundly as were his encounters with other artists and intellectuals of the Silver Age. It is around this time that he meets Nikolai Shperling. He would later comment to Sabaneev that he thought Shperling was the most spiritually prepared member of his inner circle for the Mysterium.

**Scriabin's Musical Innovations**

Scriabin's innovations coincide with a growing awareness of the possibilities for expanding traditional harmonic relationships felt by his generation; and while Scriabin moved away from conventional diatonic harmony later in life, he never abandons it altogether. The music I will be playing tonight is representative of his “later-style” which is perhaps best characterized by that which it lacks, namely an end. His radical harmonic language never provides the listener with a feeling of satisfaction, closure, or rest (which can be psychologically quite taxing). This music, even more than Wagner’s, is the perfect symbolic analogue of the endless metaphysical striving of the Schopenhauerian Will.

**Shperling’s Early Work**

[Slide 7]

During the early stages of my research I discovered a work by Shperling that sold at auction in October of 2015 on the Russian auction website Аукцион. It sold for 100k rubles.

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9 The link to this listing is no longer active.
(roughly 1.5k dollars), which is to be expected as he is unknown. They estimate the date of composition to be around 1900, so he would have been about twenty years old at the time [Slide 8]. If this is the case, then it is the earliest extant work by the artist. This is helpful from a research standpoint for a number of reasons - first and foremost, it allows us to better trace his artistic development over a longer span of time. After I began communicating with the researchers in Moscow (please note that this work is not mentioned their book), I learned that there are more than one of these floating around [Slide 9]. It turns out that Shperling made several lithographs of this work. Comparing the one I found (which they had not seen) with one of the lithographs (which they had), we determined that this must be the original sketch upon which the lithographs were based.

Traditionally, the Bacchanalia is one of the most conventional scenes you encounter in Western art. So we do we make of Shperling's take on it? What do we see? The blissful expressions (closed eyes are a recurring motif in his work) of the procession of nymphs, arms interlocking as if merging together into an undifferentiated unity, represents the loss of individuation which was the ultimate goal of the ancient orgiastic cults of Bacchus and Dionysius. From a formal point of view, a comparison with an earlier, neoclassical representation, like the French artist Adolphe Bouguereau's *The Youth of Bacchus* (1884), reveals a similar use of the human form to delineate the boundaries of the composition [Slide 10]. Another name this work has gone by at auction (note: we do not know what Shperling actually called it) is «Хоровод Пана» (“Wandering Pan”). Mikhail Vrubel's 1899 rendering of Pan, which is closer to the Leshy, a forest spirit of Slavic mythology, creates an interesting
juxtaposition with Shperling as both artists were involved with different aspects of the Russian Symbolist art scene [Slide 11].

The first work which appears in the Museum's book is actually a photograph of a drawing which was discovered in their archive [Slide 12]; no one knows for sure where it came from, when it was taken, or when the drawing was made. The provisional title “Assyrian Motifs,” would seem to indicate that it was part of series. The first thing that caught my eye when I saw this work was the resemblance between the female figure and one of the nymphs from the previous work [Slide 13]. The male figure and statue in the background (resembling the Gates of Babylon) are where the Assyrian theme comes through. The Orientalism of Delacroix’s painting *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), based on the tragedy by Lord Byron, is a clear antecedent to Shperling’s more stylized imagery [Slide 14]. In her commentary on this work, Oksana Sanjarova notes that “One may call it erotic, however the name of the tricky god of love is poorly connected to the scene: the Assyrian king in the tall hat and the naked woman leaning toward his legs like a big cat… his hand grabbing her long hair… her head thrown back. However, on the face of the victim (is she a victim?) the pain is mixed with pleasure.”

Stylistically, I argue that it is possible to see links with earlier Symbolist (mainly French and Belgian) art in this work. This pattern of a dominant masculine figure towering over a sort of animalized feminine one appears again and again [Slide 15]. These are by Ferdinand Khnopff (middle) and Jan Toorop (right). By utilizing this particular posture, Shperling invites comparison with these earlier symbolist artists in such a way that leaves little room for

10 Санжарова О. Темное очарование Н.В. Шперлинга. Исследовательский этюд // Скрябин и современники Указ. изд. С. 113.
speculation as to whether he actually knew of their work. The resemblance is too strong for it
to be accidental, so we may reasonably assume he had some familiarity with the artistic
currents then running through Europe. But this is still just the beginning of analysis. In my
article, I pursue the question of possible meanings that lie behind this sort of binary
relationship, appealing to semiotic theory to provide grounding for interpreting the visual
culture of the period. I also suggest a parallel development taking place in music in order to tie
the discussion back into Scriabin. This I will attempt to do now.

Scriabin’s Early Symphonic Music (1900-1904)

[Return to Slide 7] So what was Scriabin doing around this time? Trying to prove
himself as a serious composer by writing symphonies of epic proportion (his first has six
movements and ends with a choral finale). I now want to play a few excerpts from this music
in order to trace a theme - an evocation of Nature - which is a recurring motif at this time.
Here it is in the first symphony of 1900 [Play excerpt]; and the second symphony written one
year later [Play excerpt]; and one final time in the third symphony of 1903-1904 [Play excerpt].
Now it is in the last example right toward the end that I want to focus your attention. [Play
excerpt] The sudden intrusion of the brass is Scriabin’s way of gesturing back to the first
movement entitled “Борёба” (“Struggles”), where right at the outset a philosophical theme in
the brass representing the self-assertion of the Will is heard [Play excerpt]. What’s the
struggle? [Return to Slide 12] The active masculine pole of the psyche in opposition to the
passive, feminine one. So the direction we are moving in is from an outer representation of
Nature to the expression of “inner Nature.” That’s the general direction Scriabin is moving in
his development as a composer at this period, as he sheds the need for external metaphor or representation in favor of a direct engagement with a more abstract metaphysics.

To reprise a bit before moving on: Romantics tend to think in terms of opposites; this brief discussion of binary symbolism in the orchestral works in terms of the particular instrumentation and thematic material is indispensable to gaining insight into Scriabin’s development as a composer. Unfortunately, due to the gap in our knowledge of Shperling’s life and work, we cannot trace his artistic development with the same degree of precision. However, when his work does finally reappear it certainly seems to have undergone a transformation along similar lines.

**The Moscow Salon**

“There is no old or new, no low or high, and all directions are equal in front of Beauty when the artist tries to reflect it. Regardless of the forms that Art is taking, the only eternal parts are the mysteries of spirit that are incarnated in the miracle of the visible, in the eternally beautiful fairytale of the world. This is the unchangeable essence of Art.”

This is the final part of a statement issued by the members of the Moscow Salon, an organization founded in March 1910, upon which the title of my talk is based. They were united by their dissatisfaction with the current state of art exhibitions, and collectively strove to “renew the traditions of the Old Masters.” Organized by recent graduates of Moscow College of Art and Architecture, their annual exhibitions began in February of 1911. At the beginning of November 1913, Shperling accepted an invitation to join and soon became an active participant in the organization. A document uncovered in Moscow reveals that Shperling entered the following works at his first exhibition after joining: “Funeral March,”

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11 Скрябин и Современники. С. 62-63.
“Siegfried,” “The Dutchman,” and “The Knight Retz.(sic).” In less than a year, he became the head of this organization, and shortly thereafter, in a unanimous decision, Scriabin was made an honorary member. In a letter of acceptance from London April 27, 1914, he writes to his friend Shperling: “Dear Head N.B., Let me thank you for appointing me to this position and I will now consider myself to be one of the members of the Moscow Salon. Be certain of my complete respect.” It is a completely new discovery, that both artists were involved in this organization.

According to their mission statement they promoted a “tolerance of all the beliefs in the arts,” and we know Shperling must have taken its foundational principles seriously, as he would not have worked his way up the totem pole to become head of the organization if he hadn’t. So how does to this group distinguish itself ideologically from others which exist at the time, and where does it stand in relation to the rapid developments taking place in European Modernism more broadly? These are questions that I continue to explore in my research but to give you a sense of the remarkable diversity taking place around this time, and the collaborations between artists of different media, I want to consider a few examples.

Between 1910-1911, around the time Scriabin was collaborating with the actress Alisa Koonen, who he worked with on several occasions experimenting with interpretive movement to his music in a kind of pantomime (what she refers to in her memoirs as plastic rhythm), Scriabin also met the choreographer Kasian Goleizovsky.12 Apparently getting word that “ballet people were mutilating his music,” he paid Goleizovsky a visit, sitting in on some

rehearsals, advising him on which pieces he felt were appropriate for dancing to. A few years later, Goleizovsky produced *Scriabiniana*, a series of tableaux set to Scriabin’s solo piano works. The clip I want to show you was taken from a 1972 production at the Bolshoi. The opening sequence is set to Scriabin’s Poem for piano Op. 32 No. 1 (1903), the fascinating part of which is how we see Goleizovsky interpreting Scriabin’s music, specifically its middle section which is marked “inafferoando,” by the composer. What does it mean? The pianist Koji Atwood calls it “Scritalian,” in other words - a poor attempt to spell that which is inexpressible in words, i.e. the ineffable. What happens to the dance pairings at this moment is quite special as suddenly it becomes a collective act which symbolizes a union among the individual participants. Here we see a strong parallel with Matisse’s famous painting *La Danse* which also appeared at this time. [Slide 16][Performance: Scriabin’s Poem for Piano Op. 32 No. 1].

The year 1911 also marks two landmarks in the Modernist movement [Slide 17]: The premiere of Scriabin’s *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* Op. 60 for Piano and Orchestra, here depicted by Leonid Pasternak. On the right, we see a painting done by Kandinsky called *Impression III*, of the same year, done following a concert he attended in Munich by Schoenberg.

**Gille de Rais**

[Performance: Scriabin’s Prelude Op. 74 no. 2]  Scriabin often remarked that “to create is to limit oneself,” in other words, composition is about setting restrictions. In this late prelude from his final opus (marked “contemplatif”), he limits himself to a single octatonic

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scale with which he creates, almost imprisoned within its own symmetry, a five-voice contrapuntal texture, the melody of which is trapped in an infinite loop; a static drone of pure fifths (separated at the tritone) in the bass suggests a march. It is a very passive and melancholic work, there is no push and pull like you hear in most of Scriabin’s other music. To Sabaneev, he remarked that it represented an “astral desert,” and spoke of the presence of “Sister Death.” The scene he describes is presumably taken out of the libretto to his unfinished Prefatory Action. The musicologist Simon Morrison explains:

“The Narrator introduces us to a biblical ‘hero,’ a cruel insatiable warrior. He threatens to annihilate his enemies with his army, but leads it into defeat. Badly wounded, he abandons his sword and flees into the desert. There he meets ‘Sister Death,’ a benevolent figure who instructs him to atone for his deeds... He dies redeemed: his soul ascends to the noumena of all realities.”

Immediately beside the composition podium where the sketches for this music first appear, hangs another work by Shperling - a miniature portrait of Gille de Rais [Slide 18].

Most of you are probably wondering: “Who is Gille de Rais?” [Slide 19] He was a French nobleman, and companion-in-arms to Joan of Arc, who at the end of the Hundred Years War, retired to his estates where he inexplicably descended into madness and went on a rampage, ritualistically slaughtering hundreds (his victims were all children). Eventually he was tried by the Inquisition in 1440 for crimes related to witchcraft, sentenced to death by hanging, his corpse then burned. The legend of Gille became the subject of K.L Huysman’s infamous novel La Bas (“The Damned”) which features a character named Durtal who is writing a biography of Gille de Rais while simultaneously exploring Satanism and the Occult in

fin de siècle Paris. Somehow, his crimes became intertwined with the Bluebeard legend; Bartok wrote an opera about it around the same time Shperling drew this work.¹⁶

The first thing I want to draw your attention to is the faint object emitting light in the top-right portion of the composition. Can anyone identify this? It is a symbol which bears a dual-meaning: In astrology, it is linked with Saturn and in the alchemical tradition, it is associated with the element lead. So what is it doing there? What is its function in the work? In order to answer these questions we have to tap into the rich associations that are conveyed by the symbol [Slide 20]. First, Saturn’s connection with the mythic figure of Kronos who, as the myth goes, devours his own children out of fear they might overtake him. This series of depictions by Matham, Rubens, and Goya, reveals an obvious correlation with Gille and his crimes, especially noteworthy is the engraving by Jacob Matham from the late Renaissance because again, Shperling sees himself as a draftsman working within the traditions of the past [Slide 21].

In the tradition of humanist thought, Saturn governs the melancholic humor and is associated with the spleen, black bile and creative genius. Which brings us to Dürer’s allegorical engraving Melancholia I (1514) [Slide 22]. In her essay “Retrieving What Time Destroys,” Klára Móricz writes:

“The self-conscious artist in a state of powerlessness remained a compelling image for artists even in the twentieth century. Melancholy, as Dürer’s engraving demonstrates, is inseparable from the Saturnine mysticism of alchemy. Because he merged with the Greek Kronos, the Roman Saturn was also related to

¹⁶ See: Carl S Leafstedt’s Inside Bluebeard’s Castle: Music and Drama in Bela Bartok’s Opera. pg. 169-73.
time, which devours temporal events just as Kronos devoured his children. Spellbound under the sign of Saturn, the melancholic was thought to be frequently seized by recollections.”¹⁷

In Erwin Panofsky’s famous interpretation of this work, he concludes that the engraving is a spiritual self-portrait of Dürer.¹⁸ This melancholic association holds even as late as the beginning of the Modern period in literature, as for instance in Baudelaire’s poetic universe where ‘Spleen’ is closely linked to the concept of “Ennui” which, in the opening poem of his famous collection *Flowers of Evil*, he calls “the ugliest, meanest, most obscene monster in the human zoo.”¹⁹ The term is used to designate a feeling of despondency which opposes our desire to transcend quotidian existence toward the Ideal. The entire collection of *Flowers of Evil* is divided between these two worlds - one focused on the material, the other the spiritual.

The final element is the one that ties everything together: The shaded region behind Gille, despite what you may be thinking, is no ordinary shadow. Shperling revealed to Scriabin that it was “an astral shadow” where he placed himself.²⁰

So that is the rough picture; in the article, I try to make the case that Shperling is drawing upon these associations in this work which is not a portrait of Gille de Rais, so much as a spiritual self-portrait, in the tradition of Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, which fits with the goals and aspirations of the Moscow Salon as a group, i.e. to renew the tradition of the old masters, and Dürer, I think it is safe to say, can be counted among his influences. Finally, this whole idea of an astral realm, a spiritual plane outside the material, a fourth dimension, was quite common

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²⁰ Саңжарова О. Темное очарование Н.В. Шперлинга. Исследовательский этюд. С. 108.
during this period. Both Shperling and Scriabin saw their work as attempting to penetrate into a fourth dimension, something beyond time and space, a realm of pure spirit.

**Tibi Purissima...**

[Performance: Scriabin’s Poem Op. 59 No. 1] In 1914, Shperling gave this work, another lithograph, to Scriabin [Slide 23]. Sanjarova identifies the gothic influence, placing *Tibi Purissima* as it is known, within the Western chivalric tradition which begins in the Christian era and centers around the worship of a feminine ideal, typically a dead women glorified in heaven (e.g. Mary, Beatrice, Laura, Sophia). The closed eyes accentuates the ecstatic quality of the scene and recalls the earlier nymphs and satyrs [Slide 24]. What I find most fascinating about this work is the androgynous quality of the knight, the ambiguity of which is really striking. Why should we assume it is a man? Are there any explicit signs of gender present? The armor conceals the physical body, hence androgyny functions here as a way of disrupting the sort of gender binary previously considered. Compared alongside the maenad or the Assyrian concubine, we can not help but wonder. Do we know of any legendary female knights from this period? You should not have to think too hard about it. Perhaps Joan of Arc? [Slide 25] Joan would make a fitting choice alongside Gille de Rais after all - the sinner and the saint. Might this then be Shperling’s take on the Annunciation scene? [Slide 26] Note also the prominently displayed wedding band on the woman, symbolizing the sacred marriage to Christ. Perhaps St. Catherine, who is often depicted wearing such a band as in Memling’s

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Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine (1480)? [Slide 27] Also take note of the subtle red accents under the armor and on the lips; all of these elements suggest something other than a straightforward reading to me.

The work still hangs in Scriabin’s bedroom where he placed it over a century ago. Also in the bedroom is a miniature reproduction of Da Vinci’s St. John the Baptist. [Slides 28-29] The figure of Leonardo was an important one for a number of thinkers of Scriabin’s generation. The principle of composite beauty which Leonardo taught his students, the subtle mixture of the masculine and feminine, represented their vision of ideal beauty which, in the words of Maya Corry in her essay The Alluring Beauty of a Leonardesque Ideal was “designed to remind the viewer that the beauty upon which they gazed was spiritual, not corporeal: it was a transcendental pulchritude that could never occur in the earthly realm, only in the divine.”

And what about the text? [See Slide 23] “Tibi purissima desiderium animae meae superstillare desiro” (“I long to pour the desire of my soul over you, O purest one.”) I’ve been told that there's a slight mistake in Shperling’s Latin: desiro should be desidero. The notion of “pouring” out desire is related to the concept of kenosis, which refers to Christ’s “self-emptying” in order to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The synthesis of sacred and profane, the mixing of erotic and spiritual desire, is precisely what these artists admired in each others work; and the notion of androgyny as a ideal human state, fascinated both men.

Before moving on, I want to reflect on this pair for just another moment. [Slide 30] Taken together, these works reveal Shperling’s fascination with the concepts of good and evil,

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22 Corry, Maya. The Alluring Beauty of a Leonardesque Ideal: Masculinity and Spirituality in Renaissance. Milan, 2013. pg. 174
and the fuzzing of the lines between the two. In this way, he and Scriabin are quite similar. In 1911, Scriabin wrote another poem he titled “Masque.” Here, Scriabin revels in the act of moving between light and dark. Note the contrasting gestures - one ascending (marked “enigmatique”), the other (marked “bizzare”). [Slide 31] [Performance: Scriabin’s Poem for Piano Op. 64 no. 1 “Masque].

Parting Ways: India and the Front

Let us return to the Oriental Sage to see if we can make any more sense of it in light of everything that has been discussed so far. [Slide 32] At the beginning of my talk, I paired the Sage with music intended to enhance it’s “mysterious” and “vague” qualities; the hypnotic effect of the prelude’s oscillating harmonic rhythm, in a sense parallels the manner in which the viewer’s eye sways back and forth between the Sage’s eye and the flower. There is a clearly discernible gender binary present in the way the masculine right side presents itself to us, while the long effeminate fingers of his left hand displays the white lotus. In a way it almost reminds us of the myth of Polyphemus and Galatea [Slide 33]. Here we see a gradual development of this myth within the symbolist tradition over a thirty year period from Moreau up to Redon and Shperling, the key difference being how the symbolism functions. It is also noteworthy that, instead of being fixated on the object of desire, the Sage confronts the viewer as if wanting to communicate some kind of mystical knowledge. The religious overtones come through when compared alongside Girieud’s depictions of Christ, and Jan Toorop’s work Le Désir et l’Assouvissement (“Desire and Satisfaction”) [Slides 34-35]. Then there is the lotus itself to consider: In Eastern religions, the lotus symbolizes spiritual evolution - rising through the
dark depths to blossom in the sunshine, overcoming as opposed to folding within itself. This aspect can be seen in some of Roerich’s works which were done in the 1930’s while he was living in India, which are much more passive and contemplative in their mysticism, especially the sage sitting in the water, gently cradling with both hands an open lotus, eyes closed, head down [Slides 36-37].

In January of 1914, Scriabin was introduced to the Indian musician and founder of Universal Sufism Hazrat Inayat Khan whom he later invited to his home where they discussed his trip to India and plans for the Mysterium [Slide 38]. One can not help but wonder what Inayat Khan thought of the Oriental Sage, which he must have seen.

In the Summer of that same year, Shperling was mobilized to the front [Slide 39]. The research team in Moscow was able to uncover a handful of letters sent by Shperling to Scriabin. In one he writes: “Dear A.N., this place is very boring... I will be sent to Germany. Leaving in approximately six days. Give greetings to Tatyana. Yours, Sperling.” In another letter, we learn that Scriabin has sent gifts to Shperling’s entire regiment. On September 6, he writes: “I’m alive, fighting on the first line of the front. I’m very devastated that there is no comfort here.” It is interesting to note how many artists embraced the war as a sort of cosmic catharsis. Scriabin thought it would be a “spiritual renewal” for the masses “even though it destroyed them materially.”

On the opposing side, Franz Marc, cofounder of the Blue Rider Almanac, thought the war “would be some kind of a purification of a spoiled and rotten

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23 Попков В., Дубровина К., Скрябин С. 74-84.

civilization,” but by 1915, he admitted that: “War is one of the most evil things to which we sacrificed ourselves.” He died in action.25

Shperling continues writing regularly into the winter months. On December 7, he writes: “Dear A.N., I’m alive. Thinking a lot about your work. I took as a hostage some surgeon from the other side and we got hold of documents that prevented them from getting us.” While Shperling is fighting to stay alive in battle, Scriabin attends the opening of the Moscow Chamber theatre where Kalidas’s version the of Indian epic Sakuntala was performed, in a free adaptation by Konstantine Balmont, with music composed by Inayat Khan (in an arrangement by Vladimir Pol), directed by Alexander Tairov and starring Alisa Koonen as the lead role. For a long time, the music was thought to have been lost, but in 1991 it was discovered at the Glinka Museum. [Slides 40-41] Let’s listen to an excerpt [Play Excerpt]. Shperling sends his final letter at the end of January, 1915: “Dear A.N., I’m alive and very fine, best regards, Shperling.”26

[Slide 42] On April 11, 1915, a few weeks before he died, Scriabin performed some works (several of which I played for you tonight) at a lecture given by another one of his close friends, the Lithuanian poet Jurgis Baltrusaitis [Slide 43]. That evening Baltrusaitis read an essay he wrote titled “On the Essence of Art and the Creative Duty of the Artist,” where he spoke of the creative act as a sacerdotal offering:

“...it is important to note that if the essence of art is unconditionally bound to the world will itself and its infinite manifestations, so do the external elements of art flow out of them. For what are the artistic rhythm of music and poetry, what are the symmetry and gracefulness of ornaments and


26 Попков В., Дубровина К., Скрябин. Там Же.
buildings, if not the artistic repetition of the common world rhythm and gracefulness, if not the submission of art to the total order and harmony? And the feeling of beauty, the whole aesthetic experience, is it not possessed by us only because in experiencing the artistic rhythm and harmony we gladly join ourselves to the primeval gracefulness of will itself, which called us into life? From the view developed above it is completely clear that every truly artistic work is liturgical in its deepest roots and religious in its highest peaks... Frequently it has been asserted and even proved that art, at least in some of its forms, arose at the side of the priest, that is, originated in the temple.”

One of Scriabin's final compositions was a set of Two Dances, Op. 73. In the first, Guirlandes ("Garlands"), he calls for “languid gracefulness.” Here, the right hand figurations are meant to symbolize sacrificial flames. The title refers to the procession of dancers who, like in the ancient greek tradition, wore garlands at the festivals of Dionysius. [Performance: Scriabin’s Dane for Piano Op. 73 No. 1]

Closing Remarks

Originally I had intended on ending my talk by listing some of the theories which appear in the museum’s book about Shperling’s whereabouts after the war. With the exception of one, which hints that he may have emigrated to Ethiopa, the rest presume his death. However, just a week ago it came to my attention that a certain “Nicolas Sperling” was commissioned in 1930 by the Benaki Museum in Athens (that’s Athens, Greece of course) to do a series of watercolors of well-known Athenians in traditional garb for the album Greek National Costumes on which he worked for nearly fifteen years [Slide 44]. The originals are currently on display at the Benaki museum and at some point, they were even featured on postage stamps. It seems that Shperling's work has gotten more exposure than previously thought [Slide 45]. This new fact was discovered too late for the researchers from the museum

to include it in their book, a detail that Мs. Дубровина shared with me just a few days ago. The woman who uncovered this new information, Ирина Жалнина-Василькиоти, published a book in May 2016: *Russian emigres in Greece in the 20th Century*, and an article on Shperling’s story shortly thereafter. We now know that he was in Baron Wrangel’s army when they evacuated from Crimea, moving first to Turkey, then to France and later Serbia, Germany and Egypt. It was while living in Egypt when he met Antonis Benaki, a Greek businessman and art collector who brought him to Athens.28

As you can see, this is still an ongoing research project so I can not offer a conclusion at this time, however I will close with the following reflections:

Traditionally, the concept of *ekphrasis* is applied to situations in which the work of one artist (usually a painter) inspires the work of another; this was a typical practice of romantic poets seeking inspiration. However in recent years, the concept has been expanded to include artists of different media. We know that Mussorgsky’s famous cycle *Pictures at an Exhibition* was supposedly inspired by an exhibition of works by the artist Viktor Hartman, and Rachmaninoff also reportedly composed two works after paintings by the Symbolist artist Arnold Bocklin. It was Sabaneev who first suggested that the influence of Shperling could be felt in some of the later works of Scriabin. This is something I am still exploring in my research.

It must be noted that Scriabin was not writing “mature” music at the time of his death. Unlike Bach or Beethoven who were writing these big synthetic works, summing up their entire compositional careers toward the end, Scriabin’s life was cut tragically short while in the

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28 Жалнина-Василькиоти И. Художник Николай Шперлинг и коллекционер Антонис Бенаки. в журнале Русское искусство. Россия - Греция. Диалог культур, том 2016, № 2.
prime of his life and at the height of his creative powers. Like most artists who were active during this period, his style would have undoubtedly continued to evolve and we can only speculate in what direction it may have gone.

Shperling was only in his early thirties at the time he made the few works that we know of from this pre-war period. The last work in the museum, another one that hangs in Scriabin’s bedroom where he died, is the Funeral March which is very different from his other work from this period, closer to abstraction even [Slide 46]. And what do we make of these recently discovered prints? They are clearly commissioned works, however it makes you wonder whether Shperling had made a return to a more neoclassical style. And now we also know that he later lived in Turkey, France, Serbia, Germany, Egypt then Athens. I wonder what kind of trail he left, if any. Needless to say, I will be investigating the matter further. However, a more proximate goal is to publish these initial findings sometime this year, in order to share this much of the story that we do know. Thank you.
II. Transcript of Conference Report

[Slide 1]

(Opening Remarks)

I would like to begin by thanking the Scriabin Memorial Museum for giving me the opportunity to take part in this event. I would also like to thank three scholars affiliated with the museum - Ксения Дубровина, Владимир Попков, and Оксана Сангарова - for assisting me with my research this past February. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Ohio University’s Honors Tutorial College for cosponsoring both of these trips; without their generosity, I would not be here with you today.

The artist Nikolai Shperling first came to my attention through Sabaneev’s *Reminiscences* where he is described as a mysterious young soldier and mystic and member of Scriabin’s close circle of friends. Outside of this context, however, Shperling has received virtually no attention from scholars. Through an encounter with this work which appeared on an online auction in 2015, I developed an interest in his work [Slide 3]. The following year, an acquaintance returned from Moscow with a book that had been published over the summer - Скрябин и Современники: Материалы к Биографии Н.В. Шперлинга [Slide 4]. A joint effort of the three scholars I thanked earlier, this book presents newly discovered information pertaining to the artist’s life and work and relationship with the composer. Without needing any further incentive, I applied for funding to visit the museum so I could research its

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29 The international conference: “A.N. Scriabin & the Artistic Environment of his Time” was held at the Scriabin Memorial Museum in Moscow April 25-27th to commemorate the 145th anniversary of the composer’s death.

30 Сабанеев Л. Воспоминания о Скрябине. М. Музыкальный сектор госиздата 1925 г.
collection of drawings by Shperling. I made some interesting discoveries during my time here, which I would like to share with you today. I am going to begin with a brief biographical sketch of the artist based on the work of the scholars from the museum.

**Biography**

Nikolai Viktorovich Shperling was born on August 28, 1881 into a Russian-German family; one of three children to Nadezhda Mikhailovna and Victor Petrovich Shperling. His early childhood was spent in Crimea until his parents separated and Nadezhda took her two sons Sergei and Nikolai and daughter Maria to Moscow in the early 1890's; Nadezhda was accidentally poisoned and died shortly after the move. As a child, Shperling studied with his brother and Alexander Fedorovich Kots (later founder of the Darwin Museum) in the First Moscow Gymnasium. Around this time, he began taking private drawing lessons from Nikolai Avenirovich Martynov (1842-1913), who taught at the Moscow School of Painting. In 1900, Shperling enrolled in the History Philology department of Moscow University where he would later successfully defend a dissertation on "The Origin of the Slavophile Theory" in 1906. It was during this period that Shperling travelled abroad to visit the art galleries of Berlin, Vienna, Paris and Florence and became acquainted with the art of the modernist masters that would have an impact on his work. Parallel to his university studies, Shperling received training in the army and remained a soldier throughout most of his life.

One of the most significant discoveries to come out of the research done by the museum staff concerns an organization which Shperling and Scriabin both belonged to that

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31 Попков В., Дубровина К., Санжарова О. Скрябин и Современники: Материалы к биографии Н. В. Шперлинга 2016
was founded in 1910 by a group of recent graduates of Moscow College of Art and Architecture, called the Moscow Salon. During a period of rapid modernization in Russia in which the very fabric of society was on the verge of collapse, an organization like the Moscow Salon that promoted a “tolerance in the belief of all the arts,” and sought to “renew the traditions of the Old Masters” stood in opposition to the more radical art and artists of the period whose revolutionary politics went together with their aesthetics. To demonstrate this point, consider the 1912 “Slap In The Face Of Public Taste” issued by D. Burliuk, A. Kruchenykh, V. Mayakovsky, and V. Khlebnikov who called for “Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, et al. to be thrown “overboard from the Ship of Modernity,” alongside the closing passage from the Moscow Salon’s Mission Statement:\[32\]

“There is no old or new, no low or high, and all directions are equal in front of Beauty when the artist tries to reflect it. Regardless of the forms that Art is taking, the only eternal parts are the mysteries of spirit that are incarnated in the miracle of the visible, in the eternally beautiful fairytale of the world. This is the unchangeable essence of Art.”\[33\]

In November 1913, Shperling accepted an invitation to join and soon became head of the organization; in a unanimous decision, Scriabin became an honorary member shortly thereafter. In a letter of acceptance from London April 27, 1914, he writes to his friend: “Dear Head N. V. [Shperling], Let me thank you for appointing me to this position and I will now consider myself to be one of the members of the Moscow Salon. Be certain of my complete respect.”\[34\]


\[33\] Скрябин и Современники. С. 62-63.

\[34\] Скрябин и Современники. С. 69-71.
Assyrian

At the 20th exhibition of the Moscow Товарищества Художников in 1913, Shperling exhibited four miniatures, three of which are now lost; the other, entitled Assyrian survives only as a photograph in the archive of the Scriabin Museum [Slide 5]. It takes no more than a mere superficial glance to see the Orientalism of Delacroix’s 1827 painting The Death of Sardanapalus, based on the tragedy by Lord Byron, as a clear antecedent to Shperling’s more stylized imagery [Slide 6]. We also note the affinities between the female figure and one of the maenads from the earlier bacchanalia auction piece [Slide 7]. The influence of French and Belgan symbolist artists, especially those associated with the Salon de la Rose + Croix [Slide 8] who gave exhibitions in Paris from 1892-1897 (like F. Khnopff, Jean Delville, Jan Toorop, Ferdinand Holder) can be detected in the following comparisons. The winged-bull statue or the Lamassu was a common symbol for this group and appears in the writings of its iconic founder Joseph Peladan [Slide 9]; Shperling invites further comparison with this group by utilizing this particular arrangement, which emphasizes the verticality of a dominant masculine figure towering over a passive, animalized, feminine one [Slide 10]. The critic Emanuel Husid, who was present at the exhibition, went so far as to proclaim that “In Shperling’s paintings we can find the second edition of Fernand Khnopff.”35 Before moving on, it’s worth mentioning that there is copy of Ferdinand Hodler’s Disappointed Souls (1891) in Scriabin’s bedroom - Holder was among those who participated in the Salon de la Rose +Croix exhibitions, hence this is further evidence that both men had affinities for this group [Slides 11-12].

35 Жаллина-Василькиоти И. Художник Николай Шперлинг и коллекционер Антонис Бенаки. в журнале Русское искусство. Россия - Греция. Диалог культур, том 2016, № 2, C. 98
Oriental Sage

According to Sabaneev, Scriabin received this pastel, entitled Oriental Sage, from Shperling in 1912. The following year when he moved into his apartment on Nikolopeskovsky lane, he hung it above the composition desk in his study where it still hangs today [Slide 13].

It is difficult to trace the many the stylistic influences present in this work but there are some striking similarities in its iconography with Jan Toorop (again, an artist linked to the Salon de la Rose + Croix) in his work “Desire and Satisfaction” [Slide 14] and a strong resemblance to Pierre Girieud's depictions of Christ as seen here [Slide 15]. However, the most important aspect of this I want to focus your attention on is Shperling’s stylization of the Russian Icon.

Shperling’s evocation of the Christ Pentacrator in the Sage, with its one-dimensional treatment of space and laconic color scheme, and combination of oriental motifs (the white lotus, illusion of a “third/inner” eye) with archaic devices associated with the Byzantine icon, is likely to be inspired by the Symbolist’s obsession with the idea of “synthesis,” which explains the symbolism of the Sage’s enigmatic pose, i.e. how the masculine right eye and the feminine left hand displaying the lotus, represent metaphysical polarities and create an oriental counterpart to the hypostatic dual-nature of Christ [Slide 16].

But there’s something else present, namely the intimation of evil. Ilya Glazunov’s Christ and Antichrist (1999) makes for an interesting comparison as the former is quite explicit in this portrayal whereas Shperling, a master of understated gestures, needs nothing more than subtle shading and a mysterious grin (which disturbs the solemnity of the icon) - to achieve the same effect. [Slide 17] Christ and Antichrist are a central theme in the work of the
symbolist writer D. Merezhovsky, who following Nietzsche, tries to erase the boundaries between good and evil [Slide 18]. Sabaneev informs us that Scriabin would simply refer to the Sage as “Black,” and we’re told that he “loved it.” He shared with Shperling, the fin-de-siecle fascination with the concepts of good and evil, and the fuzzing of the lines between the two. It’s easy enough to sense this in many of his later works which take on a darker hue than any of his earlier work, e.g. in the poem “Masque” where he revels in the act of moving between light and dark by means of contrasting symbolic gestures - one ascending toward the heavens (marked “enigmatique”) and it’s opposite marked (marked “bizzare”) [Slide 19].

Before moving on, I want to leave you with an image: 1915, the year of Scriabin’s death was also the year of the Last Futurist exhibition where Malevich displays his famous suprematist work “Black Square” a piece which apparently caused the great Russian scholar M. Gerzhenzon to break into tears as he thought it heralded the end of his culture. Malevich referred to it as “an icon of [his] times.” This is a fascinating comparison; on the one hand, both artists are evoking the same tradition, Shperling’s reflects the Symbolist aesthetic, as opposed to the radical abstraction of Malevich who sought to destroy the tradition altogether [Slide 20]

**Gille de Rais**

[Slide 21] Sabaneev also informs us that Shperling then gave Scriabin this work - a portrait of Gille de Rais, the French marshal and companion in arms to Joan of Arc, who at the end of the Hundred Years War retired to his estates, where he inexplicably descended into madness and went on a rampage, ritualistically slaughtering hundreds of children before he
was caught, tried and sentenced to death by the Inquisition in 1440 [Slide 22]. So how has 
Shperling drawn the portrait of Gille de Rais?

Seeking respite from the suffering and anguish caused by memories of his misdeeds, 
Shperling has Gille fix his gaze on a beacon of light; is it a sign of hope? Examining it more 
closely we see it is the sign of Saturn [Slide 23]. In the tradition of humanist thought, Saturn 
governs the melancholic humor which is associated with the spleen, black bile and creative 
genius; which brings us to Dürer’s allegorical engraving *Melancholia, I* (1514) [Slide 24]. In her 
essay *Retrieving What Time Destroys*, Klára Móricz further explores these associations, writing:

“Melancholy, as Dürer’s engraving demonstrates, is inseparable from the Saturnine mysticism of 
alchemy. Because he merged with the Greek Kronos, the Roman Saturn was also related to time, which 
devours temporal events just as Kronos devoured his children. Spellbound under the sign of Saturn, the 
melancholic was thought to be frequently seized by recollections.”

“Spellbound under the sign of Saturn,” to quote Ms. Móricz, is quite literally how Gille 
de Rais is being depicted in this work, hence I argue that Shperling is playing with these tropes 
of the melancholic condition (e.g. the general pallor of his complexion) in order to situate 
himself within a longstanding tradition of melancholic engravings going back to Dürer. 
Anticipating any objections that a “true” melancholia engraving would need to have the 
characteristic “head-in-hand,” gesture as for instance in these engravings [Slide 25], I wish to 
point out that Shperling, like the other members of the Moscow Salon, sought to “renew” and

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“take over” the traditions of the Old Masters, not to imitate or copy their iconography, the result of which would be a rather crude pastiche.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Tibi Purissima}

Scriabin received “Tibi Purissima…” the final work I will be discussing sometime in 1914, presumably before Shperling was deployed to the front. Sanjarova identifies the gothic element, the legend of the knight who “announces the Tibi Purissimus” as his lady, and cites Pushkin’s poem “Poor Knight” as a potential source of inspiration.\textsuperscript{38} [Slide 27] My interest in this work lies in an element that has not yet been discussed in connection with Shperling namely, the addition of text:

\begin{quote}
“Tibi Purissima desiderium animae meae superstillare desiro”
(“I long to pour the desire of my soul over you, O Purest one”)
(«Я желаю наливать желание своей души на тебя.»)
[I’ve been told there’s a slight mistake in Shperling’s Latin: “desidero” would be preferable to “desiro”]
\end{quote}

By introducing a stylized Latin passage obliquely referencing the concept of \textit{kenosis} (a term rich in theological connotation) into the scene, Shperling creates a dynamic interplay of image and text. The term comes from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians where, to paraphrase, Christ in the Incarnation is said to have “humbled himself... emptied himself of his divinity...

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\textsuperscript{37} This association of melancholia with creative genius comes from the theories of Marcilio Ficino and its presence can be felt as late as the 19th-20th century especially in portraiture, as can be seen in a number of photographs of artists and intellectuals of the time; including Scriabin, of course. [Slide 26]

\textsuperscript{38} Санжарова О. Темное очарование Н.В. Шперлинга. Исследовательский этюд // Скрябин и современники Указ. изд. С. 108-110.
\end{flushleft}
assuming the nature of a slave…” Yet, the erotic implications of the knights’ longing to “pour out the desire of his soul” over the “other,” violates the kenotic ethic whereby one empties oneself *imitatio christi* in order to be filled with divine grace. Sabaneev tells us that what Scriabin loved about Shperling was his desire to express the unembodied (i.e. that which cannot be embodied) in his work, and for the passionate erotic pathos of his religiosity, which was akin to Scriabin's own. In the piece I’m working on, I develop this connection a bit more by looking at some of the themes in the text for the Prefatory Act and commentary on them by Vyacheslav Ivanov.

*(Closing Remarks)*

In 1924 while reviewing a Paris Salon exhibition the critic Raymond Selig encountered four miniatures by a Nicolas Sperling and recorded the following impressions:

“He technique induces ecstasy... these four miniatures have enslaved me completely... Despite his admiration for old and new masters, the artist does not accept the idea of art-for-art’s sake. He is passionate about occultism and believes that art is capable of transmitting the immaterial and ineffable, and that art must play a vital role in Man's evolution. The goal of this position is to make art into magic, so that he can influence man through his artwork. Sperling’s extraordinary miniatures achieve this result... N. Sperling’s art is more than just painting. It is a serious contribution to civilization.”

What surprises me most about this article, aside from the fact that it tells us Shperling tried to conceal his Russian roots at some point, is that he did not, in the aftermath of the war and revolution, become disillusioned with the values and aspirations of his culture; he

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39 Художник Николай Шперлинг и коллекционер Антонис Бенаки. С. 99. «Его техника вызывает восторг... Эти четыре миниатюры поработали меня в полном смысле слова... Художник, имеющий восхищение перед старыми и новыми мастерами, не воспринимает идею искусства для искусства. Он увлечен оккультизмом и верит, что искусство способно передавать нематериальное и невыразимое и что искусство должно сыграть большую роль в эволюции человечества. Задача этого направления--сделать искусство магией, чтобы воздействовать произведением на человека. Протягивающие миниатюры Шперлинга достигают этого результата... Искусство Н. Шперлинга--больше, чем живопись. Это серьезный вклад в цивилизацию.»
remained an incorrigible mystic, passionate about occultism, against-art-for-art’s sake, continuing to maintain this dual stance in his aesthetics - one foot in the traditions of the past, the other oriented toward the future spiritual development of mankind.

Sperling is a master of stylization. His unique fusion of fin-de-siecle occultism and traditional techniques make him a worthwhile counterpoint to Scriabin, and therefore merits closer attention from Scriabin scholars as to the two artists' relationship.

For those of your wondering what happened to Sperling, thanks to Ms. Vasilkeoti we can now trace Sperling's whereabouts during and after the war: From France, Sperling went on to Serbia, Germany, then Egypt where he crossed paths with the Greek businessman and collector Antonis Benaki who commissioned a series of watercolors for the collection Greek National Costumes, a project that would occupy him for the final fifteen years of his life [Slide 28]. Before leaving for Athens, Sperling made a trip to India.40

My plans are to have an article published sometime this year to bring this story to an English readership. I sincerely hope that future research will uncover more about Sperling's whereabouts during his émigré years and perhaps some of these “ecstasy-inducing” miniatures may even resurface. Thank you.

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40 Художник Николай Шперлинг и коллекционер Антонис Бенаки С. 99-102


Research Update (In lieu of a conclusion)

Before leaving Moscow at the end of the conference, I had the good fortune of meeting Elena Borisovna Ovsyannikova, a scholar of Russian avant-garde architecture and owner of a substantial collection of Shperling’s work which she inherited from her grandfather the architect and collector Nikolai Dmitriyevich Vinogradov (1885-1980). The works in this collection date from the late 1890’s-1910’s and hence fill the gap in our knowledge of his work from the period before meeting Scriabin. During our meeting, Ms. Ovsyannikova presented me with an unique opportunity to help her organize an exhibition of Shperling’s work in the US sometime this year, and my goal is to have my article published around the same time.
Appendix A
[Images 1-46 from Lecture-Recital]
Thursday, January 12th at 6pm
Ohio University School of Music Recital Hall
Lecture-Recital by Logan Cull:

The Mysteries of Spirit
CROSS-CURRENTS IN RUSSIAN MODERNISM
[Slide 3]
СКРЯБИН
И
СОВРЕМЕННИКИ
МАТЕРИАЛЫ К БИОГРАФИИ
Н.В. ШПЕРЛИНГА
Н.В. Шерлинг. «Ассирийские мотивы».
ММС, нвф 2467а.

[Slide 12]
Н.В. Шерлинг. «Ассирийские мотивы».
ММС, инв 2467а.
Deux Poèmes

L. Scriabine

Masque

Livre une soirée cachée

[Sheet Music]
Appendix B
[Images 1-28 from Conference Presentation]
Международная научная конференция
"А.Н. Скрябин в художественном контексте эпохи"

25 апреля
11:00 Открытие конференции
Пленарные заседания

26 апреля
11:00 Пленарные заседания
19:00 Концерт фортепианной музыки
Атанас Куртев (Болгария)

27 апреля
11:00 Пленарное заседание
11:40 Презентация новых изданий о Скрябине
14:00 Новодевичье кладбище
Восхождение цветов к памятнику
А.Н. Скрябина на могиле композитора
16:00 Звучит мемориальный рояль А.Н. Скрябина
16:30 Эндрю Тайсон “Привозили Скрябина”
Выступление молодого американского пианиста
проходит при поддержке Посольства США в России
17:00 Традиционный концерт лауреатов
музейного конкурсного прослушивания разных лет
“Стипендия имени А.Н. Скрябина”

Выставки
25-27 апреля
«Скрябин в портретах и фотографиях»
«Звенищий эльф» (Скрябин и его окружение)
Николай Шперлинг

[Slide 2]
Н. В. Шперлинг. «Ассирийские мотивы».
ММС, илл. 2467а.
Н. В. Шерлинг. «Ассирийские мотивы».
ММС, нвф 2467а.
CATALOGUE
DU
SALON
DE LA
ROSE & CROIX
(10 mars au 10 avril)

A PARIS
GALERIE DVRAND-VEL
11, RUE LEPELIER, 11

M DCCC XCI

[Slide 9]
Deux Poèmes
A. Scriabine

Masque
Thursday, January 12th at 6pm
Ohio University School of Music Recital Hall
Lecture-Recital by Logan Cull:
The Mysteries of Spirit
Cross-Currents in Russian Modernism
[Slide 27]