

AN ANALYSIS OF PIANO SONATA NO. 5, OP. 53 BY ALEXANDER Scriabin

Vich Boonrod*

Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand

Received 18/03/2026, Revised 21/04/2026, Accepted 17/07/2026

Abstract

Background and Objectives: Alexander Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53 (1907) is a transitional work in which the composer moves from a late-Romantic idiom toward a personal harmonic system, and is the first of his sonatas cast in a continuous single-movement form. Its pitch organisation draws extensively on the "mystic chord" (a six-note collection, represented here as C-F#-Bb-E-A-D) rather than on functional tonality. Existing scholarship has tended to treat the work's structure, its philosophical background, or its performance challenges separately. This study offers an integrated reading across three dimensions: musical structure; the documented aesthetic context of Theosophy, the *Mysterium* project, and Scriabin's tone-colour associations; and performance-practice implications.

Methods: The study applies qualitative musicological analysis to the first edition (Leipzig, 1910), supported by verified secondary literature. Because the first edition does not print measure numbers, all measure references are the author's editorial count from the first notated measure. Aesthetic and philosophical material is treated as documented context and interpretation, not as a demonstrated cause of musical events; performance claims distinguish historical evidence of Scriabin's playing from the author's score-grounded recommendations.

Results: The work compresses sonata procedure into a continuous single movement of 456 measures. The mystic-chord collection functions as an important organising resource in the sonata's non-functional harmonic language. Where Scriabin's documented ideas can be related to specific passages — for example his association of F# with "bright blue" — the relationship is presented as interpretation rather than demonstrated fact. The performance findings connect pedalling, voicing, and temporal flexibility to identified passages and to historical accounts of Scriabin's style.

Conclusions: In this work, compositional technique can be read in relation to Scriabin's documented aesthetic context; the single-movement design supports a continuous expressive trajectory, and informed performance is aided by awareness of both the harmonic system and the documented aesthetic background. The study offers a model for evidence-disciplined analysis of early-modernist repertoire and practical, score-based guidance for performers.

Keywords: Scriabin's Fifth Sonata / Mystic Chord / Tone-Colour Association / Performance Practice / Russian Modernism

* Corresponding author, email: vichb@nu.ac.th

Introduction

Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872-1915) occupies a distinctive position as both a late representative of the Russian Romantic pianist-composer tradition and an explorer of new harmonic territory. His ten piano sonatas, composed between 1892 and 1913, trace an evolution from works rooted in a Chopinesque idiom toward experiments that set aside functional tonality in favour of personally devised harmonic resources. Among these, the Fifth Sonata, Op. 53 (1907), marks an important transition: it is the first to abandon multi-movement architecture for a continuous single-movement form, and it marks a decisive reliance on the so-called “mystic chord” as a structural resource rather than on its nominal key signature.

The work’s significance extends beyond its formal and harmonic features. It reflects Scriabin’s developing aesthetic and philosophical interests — associated with Theosophy and with currents in Russian Symbolist thought — within which he came to regard music as more than aesthetic pleasure: as, in his own conception, an art capable of affecting consciousness, a view documented by his associate Leonid Sabaneev.¹ This conviction found its most ambitious, and unrealised, expression in the *Mysterium*, a projected multimedia ritual; the late piano sonatas, beginning with No. 5, are often read in relation to that project, though the present study treats the connection as interpretation rather than established fact.

Despite the extensive attention scholars have devoted to Scriabin generally and to the Fifth Sonata in particular, much existing scholarship addresses single dimensions in isolation. Technical and harmonic studies — from A. Eaglefield Hull’s 1916 survey of Scriabin’s piano works, published as an article in *The Musical Quarterly*, to Gawboy and Townsend’s study of Scriabin’s late harmonic practice — examine the mystic chord and its deployment.² These studies are important because they establish the harmonic distinctiveness of Scriabin’s late style and help explain why the Fifth Sonata cannot be adequately described through conventional tonal syntax alone. At the same time, a purely harmonic account risks treating the work as an abstract pitch structure, detached from its formal continuity, pianistic surface, and aesthetic context.

A second body of scholarship approaches Scriabin through aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural frameworks. Sabaneev’s account of Scriabin’s idea of a “religious art” provides an important contemporary perspective on the composer’s aesthetic aspirations.³ Brown’s discussion of Russian “mystic” Symbolism and Yansori’s study of Scriabin in relation to Russian Cosmism situate the composer within broader Russian intellectual currents.⁴ Forman’s study of esoteric thought in Scriabin’s late études and Gawboy’s reassessment

¹ Leonid Sabaneev, “Scriabin and the Idea of a Religious Art,” trans. S. W. Pring, *The Musical Times* 72, no. 1063 (September 1931): 789-792.

² A. Eaglefield Hull, “A Survey of the Pianoforte Works of Scriabin,” *The Musical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 1916): 601-614; Anna M. Gawboy and Justin Townsend, “Scriabin and the Possible,” *Music Theory Online* 18, no. 2 (June 2012), https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.2/mto.12.18.2.gawboy_townsend.html.

³ Leonid Sabaneev, “Scriabin and the Idea of a Religious Art,” trans. S. W. Pring, *The Musical Times* 72, no. 1063 (September 1931): 789-792.

⁴ Malcolm Brown, “Scriabin and Russian ‘Mystic’ Symbolism,” *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (July 1979): 42-51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3519821>; Ali Yansori, “Alexander Scriabin as a Russian Cosmist,” *Studies in East European Thought* 76, no. 2 (2024): 305-331, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-023-09590-6>.

of Scriabin's synaesthesia further clarify the need to treat philosophical and colour-related materials cautiously.⁵ These sources are useful because the Fifth Sonata is not merely a technical exercise in post-tonal harmony; it belongs to a period in which Scriabin increasingly connected composition, philosophy, colour, and spiritual aspiration. Yet these contexts must be handled carefully. Philosophical background does not by itself prove the meaning of a given chord, texture, or formal event. The present article therefore treats Theosophy, the *Mysterium* project, and tone-colour associations as interpretive frameworks supported by documented context, not as direct causal explanations of musical details.

A third body of scholarship concerns performance practice and pianistic interpretation. Leikin's study of Scriabin's performance style, based on piano rolls and contemporary accounts, and Sukhina's discussion of interpretive challenges both demonstrate that Scriabin's piano writing cannot be separated from questions of touch, pedalling, voicing, and temporal flexibility.⁶ This is especially important for the Fifth Sonata because many of its structural features also pose physical and sonic challenges for the performer: repeated chords must project energy without rigidity, lyrical passages require resonance without loss of clarity, and the climactic closing region requires pacing across a long span of accumulated intensity. Performance practice is therefore not an external add-on to the analysis but one of the ways the score's formal and textural design becomes audible.

The gap addressed by this article lies in the separation of these three strands. Harmonic studies clarify pitch organisation; aesthetic studies illuminate Scriabin's intellectual and cultural environment; and performance studies show how the work may be realised at the keyboard. However, if these dimensions are kept apart, the Fifth Sonata risks being understood either as an abstract harmonic object, as a philosophical symbol, or as a set of pianistic challenges. This study instead proposes an integrated but evidence-disciplined reading. It asks how musical structure, documented aesthetic context, and performance-practice implications can be considered together while still maintaining clear distinctions among score-based observation, source-supported historical claim, interpretive reading, and the author's own performance recommendations.

This study addresses that gap by examining the Fifth Sonata through three complementary dimensions: musical structure (form, harmonic organisation, motivic process, and texture); the documented aesthetic and philosophical context (Theosophy and mysticism, the *Mysterium* project, and tone-colour associations); and performance technique and interpretive strategy. Russian Symbolism and Russian Cosmism are treated here as part of the broader intellectual background — Brown provides context on Symbolism, and Yansori situates

⁵ Lana Forman, "The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin: An Analysis of the Three Études, Op. 65" (Master's thesis, York University, 2017); Anna Gawboy, "Scriabin's Synaesthesia: The Legend, the Evidence, and Its Implications for Multimedia Counterpoint," in *Demystifying Scriabin*, ed. Vasilis Kallis and Kenneth Smith (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2022), 223-246, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/demystifying-scriabin/scriabins-synaesthesia-the-legend-the-evidenceand-its-implications-for-multimediacounterpoint/C0C1B75D9E4B1D02D9A78C29DCFCB62#chapter>.

⁶ Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Nataliya Sukhina, "Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915): Piano Miniature as Chronicle of His Creative Evolution; Complexity of Interpretive Approach and Its Implications" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2008).

Scriabin in relation to Russian Cosmism⁷ — rather than as analytic lenses applied to specific passages, since the present analysis does not test them at that level. The significance of the research is both scholarly and practical: it offers an integrated analytical model that holds analytic, aesthetic, and performance claims to distinct standards of evidence, and it provides performers with guidance grounded in score analysis and in documented features of Scriabin’s playing.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the musical structure of the work — formal design, the mystic-chord collection and its transpositions, motivic process, texture, and rhythm — with structural claims referenced to the author’s editorial measure count of the first edition.
2. To examine the documented aesthetic and philosophical context — Theosophy and mysticism, the *Mysterium* project, and Scriabin’s tone-colour associations — as interpretive frameworks rather than proven causes, asking for each whether and how specific musical features may reasonably be related to it.
3. To consider performance-practice implications, distinguishing historically documented features of Scriabin’s own playing from the author’s score-grounded recommendations.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology grounded in systematic musicological analysis. As an analytical study of an existing work rather than an empirical experiment, the design focuses on interpreting and synthesising information from multiple sources within a theoretically informed framework, with every claim held to a stated standard of evidence.

Data Sources

The principal primary source is the first edition of the score (Leipzig, 1910), engraved and printed by C. G. Röder and issued under the indication “*Propriété de l’auteur*” (self-published by the composer); it is available in the public domain through the International Music Score Library Project. Secondary sources fall into three categories: musical-analytical literature;⁸ aesthetic and philosophical literature, with Brown and Yansori

⁷ Ali Yansori, “Alexander Scriabin as a Russian Cosmist,” *Studies in East European Thought* 76, no. 2 (2024): 305-331, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-023-09590-6>.

⁸ A. Eaglefield Hull, “A Survey of the Pianoforte Works of Scriabin,” *The Musical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 1916): 601-614; Anna M. Gawboy and Justin Townsend, “Scriabin and the Possible,” *Music Theory Online* 18, no. 2 (June 2012), https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.2/mto.12.18.2.gawboy_townsend.html; Soomi Song, “The Development of Expressionism in Alexander Scriabin’s Piano Sonatas” (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 2018).

providing broader context;⁹ and performance-practice literature.¹⁰ Online recordings were consulted only as informal illustrative reference and were not treated as objects of systematic empirical analysis; no finding rests on them.

Analytical Framework

This study applies an integrated three-dimensional framework.

Dimension 1 — Musical structure

Formal analysis of the single-movement design; harmonic analysis of the mystic-chord collection, commonly represented as C-F $\sharp$ -B $\flat$ -E-A-D, and its transpositions; motivic analysis; and analysis of texture and rhythm.

Dimension 2 — Aesthetic and philosophical context

Three documented strands of Scriabin's thought are examined: Theosophical ideas of spiritual evolution and of music as an agent of change; the unrealised *Mysterium* project; and his tone-colour (so-called synaesthetic) associations. For each, the question is not whether the music "expresses" the idea but whether a specific score feature can reasonably be related to it, and with what degree of confidence. Russian Symbolism and Russian Cosmism are treated as background context, not as analytic tools, because the present analysis does not test them against the score.

Dimension 3 — Performance practice

This dimension separates historically documented features of Scriabin's playing from the author's score-grounded recommendations. It examines tempo flexibility, pedalling, voicing, texture, repeated-chord technique, and climactic pacing as performance issues derived from the score and contextualised by historical evidence. The aim is not to reconstruct a single authoritative performance, but to distinguish documented tendencies from practical interpretive recommendations.

⁹ Leonid Sabaneev, "Scriabin and the Idea of a Religious Art," trans. S. W. Pring, *The Musical Times* 72, no. 1063 (September 1931): 789-792; Malcolm Brown, "Scriabin and Russian 'Mystic' Symbolism," *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (July 1979): 42-51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3519821>; Lana Forman, "The Positivistic Mysticism of Alexander Scriabin: An Analysis of the Three Études, Op. 65" (Master's thesis, York University, 2017); Anna Gawboy, "Scriabin's Synaesthesia: The Legend, the Evidence, and Its Implications for Multimedia Counterpoint," in *Demystifying Scriabin*, ed. Vasilis Kallis and Kenneth Smith (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2022), 223-246, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/demystifying-scriabin/scriabins-synaesthesia-the-legend-the-evidenceand-its-implications-for-multimediacounterpoint/C0C1B75D9E4B1D02D9A78C29DCFDCB62#chapter>; Ali Yansori, "Alexander Scriabin as a Russian Cosmist," *Studies in East European Thought* 76, no. 2 (2024): 305-331, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-023-09590-6>.

¹⁰ Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Nataliya Sukhina, "Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915): Piano Miniature as Chronicle of His Creative Evolution; Complexity of Interpretive Approach and Its Implications" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2008); Lincoln Ballard, and Matthew Bengtson, with John Bell Young, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance, and Lore* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

Limitations

The study focuses on the Fifth Sonata and does not attempt comprehensive coverage of Scriabin's oeuvre; conclusions about his broader stylistic evolution remain tentative. It works primarily within Western analytical frameworks and does not claim full command of the Russian-language cultural context. Performance analysis draws on recorded evidence and historical accounts and cannot access Scriabin's live performances directly.

Results

Dimension 1: Musical Structure

Formal Organisation

The Fifth Sonata is cast in a continuous single movement of 456 measures, abandoning the multi-movement architecture of Scriabin's first four sonatas. Beneath the continuous surface lies a modified sonata design; the divisions in Table 1 are analytical functional regions within that continuous design, not a literal Classical-sonata template.

Table 1 Formal organisation of Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53
(analytical functional regions within a continuous single-movement design)

Source: Author's analysis based on Alexander Scriabin, *Cinquième Sonate (Sonata No. 5), Op. 53* (Leipzig: self-pub., 1910).

Section	Measures	Principal markings / musical function
Introduction / framing material	mm. 1-46	<i>Allegro. Impetuoso. Con stravaganza</i> ; sharply profiled opening gesture, rapid irregular groupings, abrupt dynamic contrast; framing material that later returns
Exposition — primary group	mm. 47-119	<i>Presto con allegrezza</i> (m. 47); compound meter (6/8); chordal thematic writing with flowing accompaniment; <i>imperioso</i> / fanfare-like / repeated-chord writing within the region
Exposition — lyrical / secondary area	mm. 120-139	<i>Meno vivo</i> (m. 120); <i>accarezzevole</i> character; sustained, lyrical material; temporal flexibility
Development / transformational section I	mm. 140-247	<i>Allegro fantastico</i> (m. 140); <i>Presto tumultuoso esaltato</i> (m. 143); <i>Allegro impetuoso</i> reprise (m. 157); thematic transformation; increasing density
Development / transformational section II	mm. 248-328	<i>Leggierissimo volando</i> (m. 248); <i>Presto giocoso</i> (m. 252); lighter, rapid textures; continued transformation
Recapitulation / intensified return	mm. 329-408	<i>prestissimo</i> (m. 329); transfigured return of earlier material in altered register, rhythm, and harmony
Coda / terminal climax	mm. 409-456	<i>vertiginoso con furia</i> (m. 409); <i>con luminosità</i> (m. 417); <i>estatico</i> (m. 433); final <i>prestissimo</i> (m. 454); repeated-chord ostinato, accelerated close, registral expansion

Note. The first edition does not print measure numbers. All measure numbers used here are the author's editorial count from the first notated measure of the 1910 first-edition score. The divisions are analytical functional regions within Scriabin's continuous single-movement design, not a literal Classical-sonata template.

The work opens with an introductory framing complex (mm. 1-46) marked *Allegro. Impetuoso. Con stravaganza*. Rather than functioning merely as a brief preface to the principal thematic material, this opening establishes the sonata's basic expressive and textural environment. Its sharply profiled gestures, rapid irregular groupings, sudden dynamic contrasts, and registral volatility introduce a type of musical behaviour that will recur in transformed ways throughout the work. The opening does not present a stable tonal space in the Classical sense; instead, it projects instability, compression, and immediacy. This is especially clear in the first eight measures, where sharply accented gestures, quintuplet groupings, and abrupt changes of dynamic level produce a sense of heightened nervous energy. Example 1 illustrates how the opening gesture and rapid irregular groupings are set against sudden dynamic contrast.

The image shows a musical score for the first eight measures of Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53. The score is written for piano and features a complex, expressive opening. Annotations highlight key features: 'Opening gesture' (measures 1-4), 'Rapid irregular groupings' (measures 5-8), 'Abrupt dynamic contrast' (measures 1-2), and 'senza sord.' (measures 5-8). The score includes dynamic markings such as *sf*, *sotto voce*, *f*, *p*, and *accel.* The title 'A. Scriabine, Op. 53.' is prominently displayed.

Example 1 Opening gesture and rapid irregular groupings in Scriabin's
Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53, mm. 1-8, first edition.

Source: Alexander Scriabin, *Cinquième Sonate (Sonata No. 5)*, Op. 53 (Leipzig: self-pub., 1910).

These opening measures are important not only as local surface effects but also as a model for the work's later treatment of gesture, register, and momentum. The short, forceful gestures and the rapid irregular groups do not disappear after the introduction; rather, they become part of the work's larger vocabulary of recurrence and transformation. For this reason, the opening should be understood as framing material rather than as an ornamental introduction. It prepares the listener for a form in which contrast and return are articulated through gesture, texture, and character as much as through thematic or tonal categories.

The primary thematic area begins at *Presto con allegrezza* (m. 47) and extends to m. 119. This passage functions as the sonata's principal thematic region, although it should not be literally understood as the "primary theme" of the exposition in a Classical-sonata sense. Its function is defined less by tonal opposition than by character, texture, and forward propulsion. The compound meter (6/8) gives the passage a buoyant and continuous motion, while the chordal thematic material in the right hand is supported by a flowing accompanimental pattern. The result is a texture that is simultaneously thematic and pianistic: the thematic identity is carried by

chordal sonorities, but the accompanying motion prevents the passage from settling into periodic regularity. Example 2 shows this interaction between chordal theme and flowing accompaniment.

Compound meter (6/8)

47 **Presto con allegrezza.**

pp

Flowing accompanimental pattern

Chordal thematic writing

52

cresc. *poco* *a* *poco*

Example 2 Primary thematic material at *Presto con allegrezza* in Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53, mm. 47-56, first edition.

Source: Alexander Scriabin, *Cinquième Sonate (Sonata No. 5), Op. 53* (Leipzig: self-pub., 1910).

Within the later part of the primary group, the writing beginning around m. 96 introduces a more emphatic and declamatory character. Marked *imperioso*, this passage combines fanfare-like sonority with repeated-chord texture and strong rhythmic drive. Although it remains within the larger primary-group span identified in Table 1, its character differentiates an internal zone of heightened force within that region. Example 3 illustrates this combination of *imperioso* character and repeated-chord texture.

96

Imperioso writing

repeated-chord writing

f *imperioso*

p *sotto voce misterioso affanato*

con sord.

100

f

p *sotto voce*

cresc.

con sord.

Example 3 *Imperioso* and repeated-chord texture in Scriabin's
Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53, beginning at m. 96, first edition.

Source: Alexander Scriabin, *Cinquième Sonate (Sonata No. 5), Op. 53* (Leipzig: self-pub., 1910).

Analytically, the passage shown in Example 3 is important because it demonstrates how Scriabin differentiates internal zones within a larger formal region. The contrast does not depend primarily on conventional tonal opposition. Instead, it emerges from changes of attack, texture, register, density, and physical pianistic energy. The repeated-chord texture also links analysis with performance practice: the passage must sound forceful and rhythmically driven without becoming heavy or blurred. This is one reason the sonata's formal design cannot be reduced to a schematic sonata-form diagram. Its internal articulation depends on how particular musical behaviours are intensified, transformed, and recontextualised.

A contrasting lyrical area follows at *Meno vivo* (m. 120), marked *accarezzevole*. This region, mm. 120-139, provides one of the clearest changes of character in the sonata. The tempo relaxes, the texture becomes more sustained, and the expressive profile shifts from sharply articulated momentum toward a more caressing and resonant sonority. It would be misleading to call this passage a "second theme" in a strict textbook sense, because the sonata's continuous design does not articulate exposition and contrast through Classical tonal procedures. Nevertheless, the passage performs a secondary-area function through contrast of character, pacing, register, and touch. Example 4 illustrates the opening of this lyrical area, showing how *Meno vivo*, *accarezzevole*, and notated temporal flexibility contribute to the change in expressive field.

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 120 to 125. A red bracket at the top spans from measure 120 to 125, with the label 'Lyrical material (Meno vivo, accarezzevole)' above it. A red arrow points from the text 'Sustained resonance' to the upper staff in measure 124. Another red arrow points from the text 'Temporal flexibility' to the lower staff in measure 124. The score includes markings for 'Meno vivo.', 'pp accarezzevole', 'm.g.', 'm.d.', 'molto rall.', 'a tempo', and 'rall.'.

Example 4 Opening of the lyrical material at *Meno vivo* and *accarezzevole* in Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53, mm. 120-125, first edition.

Source: Alexander Scriabin, *Cinquième Sonate (Sonata No. 5), Op. 53* (Leipzig: self-pub., 1910).

The contrast in Example 4 is therefore both formal and performative. Formally, it supplies a secondary region through character rather than through a conventional key relationship. Performatively, it requires a change in touch, voicing, resonance, and pacing. The notated flexibility around *rall.* and *a tempo* supports a more elastic temporal profile, but the passage still needs structural control; it should not become detached from

the larger forward motion of the sonata. This balance between lyric relaxation and formal continuity is one of the ways Scriabin sustains the single-movement design.

The first large transformational span begins at *Allegro fantastico* (m. 140) and extends through the return of the opening material at *Allegro impetuoso* (m. 157) within the broader region mm. 140-247. This section does not “develop” the preceding material in a Classical motivic-developmental manner alone; rather, it subjects the work’s characteristic gestures to changes of density, register, articulation, and character. The marking *Presto tumultuoso esaltato* at m. 143 intensifies the already unstable energy of the opening region, while the reprise of *Allegro impetuoso* at m. 157 brings the introductory material back into the body of the sonata rather than leaving it as a detached preface. This return strengthens the formal role of the opening complex as framing material. In this sense, the introduction is not simply left behind when the primary area begins; it continues to participate in the work’s larger process of recurrence and transformation.

A second large transformational span begins with *Leggierissimo volando* (m. 248) and includes *Presto giocoso* (m. 252), continuing to m. 328. Compared with the preceding region, this span lightens the surface while maintaining rapid motion. The change is not a relaxation of the sonata’s energy but a transformation of its mode of activity. Instead of the more forceful and declamatory character associated with the *imperioso* and repeated-chord writing, the texture turns toward lighter, volatile, and fleeting figuration. This shift demonstrates how Scriabin’s single-movement form depends on the reconfiguration of texture and character rather than on stable sectional boundaries. The continuity of motion is preserved, but the quality of that motion changes.

The intensified return at *prestissimo* (m. 329), mm. 329-408, functions as a recapitulation only in a qualified sense. Earlier material returns, but not as a literal restatement of an exposition. Instead, the sonata presents an intensified and transformed return in which register, density, and rhythmic pressure are heightened. This is why the designation “recapitulation / intensified return” is preferable to a stricter Classical term. The passage confirms the recurrence of earlier materials while also demonstrating how far those materials have been altered by the work’s continuous process. The return is therefore structural and rhetorical at once: it recalls earlier identities but projects them under conditions of increased urgency.

The coda or terminal climactic region begins at *vertiginoso con furia* (m. 409) and proceeds through *con luminosità* (m. 417), *estatico* (m. 433), and the final *prestissimo* (m. 454), concluding at m. 456. This final region gathers together several of the sonata’s central musical behaviours: repeated-chord ostinato, registral expansion, accelerated motion, and intensified dynamic projection. Example 5 illustrates the closing climax and final acceleration.

Estatico (closing climax)

The image displays a musical score for the closing section of Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53, measures 433 to 456. The score is written for piano and features several key annotations and musical elements:

- Measure 433:** The word *estatico* is circled in red above the treble clef. The piano part begins with a *fff* dynamic marking, also circled in red. A red bracket labeled "Repeated-chord ostinato" spans measures 433 to 436.
- Measures 437-440:** The piano part continues with a "Repeated-chord ostinato" pattern, marked with *fff* and *m.d.m.g.* (moderato, diatonico, melismatic).
- Measure 441:** The tempo changes to *presto*. The piano part is marked *mf* and *cresc.* (crescendo).
- Measures 442-446:** The piano part continues with a *cresc.* marking. The right hand features a *imperioso* (impassioned) section.
- Measure 447:** The piano part is marked *f* and *impetuoso* (impetuous).
- Measures 448-451:** The piano part continues with a *cresc.* marking. The right hand features a *f* and *impetuoso* section.
- Measures 452-456:** The piano part begins with an *accel.* (accelerando) marking, circled in red. A red bracket labeled "Accelerated close" spans measures 452 to 455. The right hand features a *prestissimo* (very fast) section, also circled in red, leading to a final *fff* dynamic marking. A red arrow labeled "Registral expansion" points to the final chord in measure 456.

Example 5 Closing climax and final acceleration in Scriabin's

Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53, mm. 433-456, first edition.

Source: Alexander Scriabin, *Cinquième Sonate (Sonata No. 5)*, Op. 53 (Leipzig: self-pub., 1910).

The repeated-chord ostinato creates a physical and sonic drive, while the registral expansion toward the upper range contributes to the sense of culmination. The final acceleration should not be understood as a purely mechanical increase of speed; rather, it functions rhetorically as the terminal intensification of the sonata's accumulated energy. As throughout the article, this climactic trajectory is described in musical and

formal terms. It may invite broader aesthetic interpretation, but it is not presented here as proof of a fixed metaphysical programme.

Taken together, these formal regions show that the Fifth Sonata compresses sonata procedure into a continuous single-movement design. Its large-scale coherence does not depend on the tonal oppositions of a Classical model but on recurring gestures, changing textures, characteristic markings, registral processes, and controlled intensification. The analytical divisions in Table 1 therefore identify functional regions within an uninterrupted musical process. They help clarify how Scriabin articulates contrast and return without abandoning continuity, and how the musical examples document specific features within that broader design.

The Mystic Chord: Construction and Deployment

The mystic chord is a six-note pitch-class collection; in one representative form associated with Scriabin's late music it may be written C-F $\sharp$ -B $\flat$ -E-A-D. Read as a stack from C, the successive intervals are: C-F $\sharp$, an augmented fourth (tritone); F $\sharp$ -B $\flat$, sounding as a major third (strictly a diminished fourth if spelled literally, F $\sharp$ to the enharmonic A $\sharp$); B $\flat$ -E, an augmented fourth (tritone); E-A, a perfect fourth; A-D, a perfect fourth. The collection is therefore better described as a mixture of fourths and tritones than as a pure quartal stack.

It is essential to distinguish three things: the pitch-class set (the abstract collection), its spelling in a given passage (which may use different enharmonic notation), and its transposed forms. This study does not assume that every occurrence is at the C-F $\sharp$ -B $\flat$ -E-A-D level. Within the sonata, the collection functions as an important organising resource in a harmonic language that is largely independent of functional tonality; although the work carries a nominal key signature, functional harmony does not govern its pitch organisation. A complete pitch-class mapping of every passage is beyond the scope of the present examples, which document the work's gestural, metric, textural, and characteristic features rather than asserting that all material derives from the collection.

Motivic Process

Distinct motivic ideas provide continuity across the single-movement design. Motive A is the opening, sharply profiled gesture of the introduction (Example 1); Motive B is the lyrical material associated with the *Meno vivo* secondary area (Example 4); Motive C is the repeated-chord, rhythmically insistent writing associated with the *imperioso* regions (Example 3). These are described here by contour, register, and rhythmic character. Claims of specific motivic transformations — inversion, augmentation, diminution, or combination — are not advanced, because no single passage is demonstrated here to exhibit them; such claims would require dedicated analytical examples and are left for further study.

Texture and Rhythm

Scriabin draws on a wide textural range, from sparse two-voice writing to dense chordal blocks across a broad registral span, with registral stratification (distinct bass, middle, and treble layers) and density varied

according to formal and expressive needs. Rhythmically, the work is characterised by continuous flux rather than periodic regularity. The principal *Presto con allegrezza* is in compound meter (6/8), and the work involves frequent meter changes; the opening features rapid irregular groupings, including quintuplets and sextuplets. No metronome marking appears in the first edition, and no numerical tempo is asserted here.

Dimension 2: Aesthetic and Philosophical Context

This dimension examines documented strands of Scriabin's thought as interpretive and contextual frameworks, not as proven causes of compositional choices. The method follows a source → score → interpretation logic. First, a contextual claim is introduced through a cited source or documented aspect of Scriabin's thought. Second, a musical feature is identified in the score in ordinary analytical terms. Third, any broader aesthetic reading is stated cautiously as interpretation rather than as proof. This sequence is important because Scriabin's reception history has often encouraged strongly metaphysical readings of his late music. Such readings may be suggestive, but they remain persuasive only when the musical observation is first established independently of the philosophical interpretation.

Theosophy and Mysticism

Scriabin's engagement with Theosophy and mysticism is documented in contemporary accounts and later scholarship. As reported by his associate Leonid Sabaneev, Scriabin conceived of music as a "religious art" capable of affecting consciousness.¹¹ This statement is important evidence of Scriabin's own aesthetic aspiration, but it does not by itself demonstrate how a particular passage in the Fifth Sonata should be analysed. The article therefore treats such testimony as evidence of a documented worldview rather than as a direct key to the score.

The Fifth Sonata can be described in purely musical terms as a continuous single-movement design that moves from an unstable and volatile opening toward increasingly intense climactic regions. The formal reading in Dimension 1 identifies this process through measure-based divisions, character markings, changing textures, registral expansion, repeated-chord writing, and final acceleration. These features do not require a metaphysical explanation in order to be analytically meaningful. They can be discussed as formal and pianistic processes grounded in the score.

Within the Theosophical and mystical contexts that Scriabin is known to have valued, the sonata's trajectory may be read as analogous to a process of intensification or aspiration. Such a reading is compatible with the composer's documented aesthetic concerns, but it remains an interpretation rather than a demonstrated property of the music. The article therefore avoids presenting "spiritual ascent," "transcendence," or

¹¹ Leonid Sabaneev, "Scriabin and the Idea of a Religious Art," trans. S. W. Pring, *The Musical Times* 72, no. 1063 (September 1931): 789-792.

“transformation” as facts proven by the score. Instead, it argues that the musical design can support such associations when they are framed cautiously and after the musical evidence has been described.

The *Mysterium* Project

Scriabin’s unrealised *Mysterium* provides a broader context for understanding his late aesthetic ambitions. It reflects the composer’s desire to expand the function of art beyond conventional concert performance and to imagine music as part of a larger sensory and spiritual event. However, the Fifth Sonata should not be treated as a direct blueprint for the *Mysterium*, nor should individual musical details be decoded as if they were components of that projected work. The present study therefore treats the relation between the *Mysterium* and the Fifth Sonata as contextual rather than demonstrative.

This distinction is important for the credibility of the analysis. The Fifth Sonata was completed as a piano work with its own formal and pianistic logic. Its continuous design, intense climactic trajectory, and non-functional harmonic language may be placed in relation to Scriabin’s larger ambitions, but the score itself does not prove a fixed programme. The *Mysterium* is therefore used here as an aesthetic horizon: it helps explain the scale of Scriabin’s late artistic imagination without being used to assign literal philosophical meanings to specific measures.

Tone-Colour (so-called Synaesthetic) Associations

Scriabin developed a system of tone-colour associations, most explicitly realised in *Prometheus*, Op. 60, which includes a part for a colour-light instrument. Whether this reflected a clinical, neurological synaesthesia is contested. Gawboy argues that the colour system is better understood as a designed, aesthetically and philosophically motivated construct than as a straightforward neurological condition.¹² Accordingly, this article uses the terms “tone-colour associations” or “so-called synaesthetic associations” rather than treating synaesthesia as an unquestioned biological fact.

The Fifth Sonata carries a nominal F# tonal centre at its opening and close, although its harmonic language is not governed by functional tonality. Table 2 lists selected tone-colour associations relevant to the discussion, including Scriabin’s association of F# with “bright blue.” This association is useful as contextual information, but it does not prove that the sonata enacts a complete colour programme, nor does it demonstrate that every musical event in the work has a corresponding colour meaning.

¹² Anna Gawboy, “Scriabin’s Synaesthesia: The Legend, the Evidence, and Its Implications for Multimedia Counterpoint,” in *Demystifying Scriabin*, ed. Vasilis Kallis and Kenneth Smith (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2022), 223-246, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/demystifying-scriabin/scriabins-synaesthesia-the-legend-the-evidenceand-its-implications-for-multimediacounterpoint/C0C1B75D9E4B1D02D9A78C29DCFCB62#chapter>.

Table 2 Selected Scriabin tone-colour associations relevant to the discussion

Source: Based on Anna Gawboy, “Scriabin’s Synaesthesia: The Legend, the Evidence, and Its Implications for Multimedia Counterpoint,” in *Demystifying Scriabin*, ed. Vasilis Kallis and Kenneth Smith (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2022), 223-246.

Key / pitch centre	Colour association
C	Red
G	Orange-rose
D	Yellow
A	Green
E	Bluish-white
B	Blue-white / metallic
F#	Bright blue

Note. This table is used as contextual evidence for Scriabin’s tone-colour associations, not as proof of a compositional colour scheme in the *Fifth Sonata*. Sources: Gawboy, “Scriabin’s Synaesthesia,” 223-246; Sabaneev, “Scriabin and the Idea of a Religious Art.”

The F# / “bright blue” association may inform a cautious reading of the sonata’s tonal orientation and aesthetic atmosphere, especially because the work’s opening and closing regions return to that nominal centre. However, the article does not claim that the *Fifth Sonata* was composed to realise a synaesthetic colour progression, nor that the colour table supplies a hidden structural code. The table is used only to clarify one documented strand of Scriabin’s thought and to show how it may enrich interpretation when kept separate from proof.

The purpose of this dimension, then, is not to make the *Fifth Sonata* “about” Theosophy, the *Mysterium*, or colour. Rather, it is to show how documented aesthetic contexts can deepen analytical understanding without replacing score-based analysis. The philosophical and colour-related materials are most useful when they are treated as interpretive frames that interact with musical evidence, not as explanatory shortcuts. This evidence-disciplined approach allows the article to acknowledge the richness of Scriabin’s intellectual world while avoiding unsupported claims about causation, programme, or listener effect.

Note on Expressionism

The *Fifth Sonata* is sometimes discussed in relation to musical Expressionism.¹³ Its continuous form, dissonant harmonic language, wide dynamic range, and sustained intensity are consistent with that discussion. This is offered as contextual framing, not as a claim about audience effect.

¹³ Soomi Song, “The Development of Expressionism in Alexander Scriabin’s Piano Sonatas” (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 2018).

Dimension 3: Performance Practice

This dimension separates historically documented features of Scriabin's playing from the author's score-grounded recommendations. The distinction is essential because the article does not attempt to reconstruct a single authoritative performance of the Fifth Sonata. Instead, it uses historical evidence to identify broad tendencies in Scriabin's pianism and then develops practical suggestions from the notated score.

Scriabin's playing is documented through the piano rolls he recorded in 1908 and 1910 and through contemporary accounts. Leikin's study of these sources describes continuous tempo flexibility, a characteristically refined use of the sustaining pedal, and a tendency toward expressive timing rather than strict metric regularity.¹⁴ Contemporary testimony likewise suggests that Scriabin's playing was valued for nuance, colour, and rhythmic elasticity. These sources are useful for understanding general features of his performance style, but they do not provide a complete performance model for the Fifth Sonata. The first edition gives tempo and character words but no metronome marking; therefore, no numerical tempo is attributed to Scriabin here.

The following observations are offered as interpretive recommendations grounded in the score, not as reconstructions of Scriabin's exact performance. They concern four areas: pedalling and harmonic colour, voicing and registral balance, temporal flexibility, and physical management of repeated-chord and climactic textures.

The sonata's non-functional harmonic language requires careful control of resonance. In passages where harmony changes rapidly or where chromatic sonorities overlap, full pedal held too long can obscure pitch clarity and rhythmic definition. At the same time, an overly dry performance would underplay the colouristic and resonant qualities that are central to Scriabin's pianistic idiom. A practical approach is therefore to use partial, fluttered, or syncopated pedalling according to the density of the texture. In the lyrical *Meno vivo / accarezzevole* material (Example 4), more sustained resonance may support the caressing character of the passage, provided that inner voices remain audible. In the denser repeated-chord and climactic regions, the pedal should clarify rather than merely amplify the sonority.

The Fifth Sonata frequently places musical energy across several registral layers: bass support, middle-register harmonic density, and upper-register projection. The performer's task is not simply to make the passage loud or brilliant, but to decide which layer carries the structural and expressive function at a given moment. In the *Presto con allegrezza* primary material (Example 2), the chordal theme should project clearly above the flowing accompaniment. If the accompaniment is too prominent, the passage loses thematic focus; if it is too suppressed, the motion and buoyancy of the 6/8 metre are weakened. In the closing climax (Example 5), voicing toward the upper register helps articulate the registral expansion without allowing the repeated-chord ostinato to become merely percussive.

¹⁴ Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

The first edition provides tempo and character markings, as well as local indications such as *rall.* and *a tempo*, but it does not supply metronome values. Performance should therefore avoid treating tempo as a fixed numerical problem. The historical evidence of Scriabin's tempo flexibility supports a flexible approach, but flexibility must remain structurally controlled. In the *Meno vivo* area, the notated temporal inflections can be shaped to emphasise the change of character from the preceding primary material. However, the passage should still remain connected to the larger single-movement trajectory. Similarly, accelerative or climactic passages should be paced so that the final intensification feels earned rather than prematurely exhausted.

The *imperioso* and repeated-chord textures associated with Example 3 require physical efficiency. A heavy vertical attack throughout the passage can lead to fatigue and can make the texture sound rigid. Rotational movement, managed arm weight, and flexible wrist release can help sustain rhythmic drive while preserving clarity. These technical suggestions are not presented as a historically documented Scriabin method; they are practical consequences of the texture as notated. In the terminal climactic region (Example 5), the performer must coordinate repeated-chord energy, acceleration, registral expansion, and dynamic growth. The goal is not simply maximum volume but controlled accumulation. The final *prestissimo* should emerge as the culmination of a long process of intensification rather than as an isolated burst of speed.

These recommendations show how the analytical findings of the article may inform performance without collapsing analysis into prescription. The score identifies the relevant textures, registers, markings, and formal functions; historical evidence provides a broader understanding of Scriabin's flexible and colouristic pianism; and the author's recommendations translate these observations into practical decisions for performance. Other interpretations remain possible, but any persuasive performance of the Fifth Sonata will need to address the same central problems: maintaining clarity within dense sonorities, balancing resonance and articulation, shaping tempo flexibly without losing continuity, and pacing the work's single-movement trajectory toward its terminal climax.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article shows that Scriabin's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 53 can be understood most productively through the interaction of musical structure, aesthetic context, and performance-practice implication. None of these dimensions is sufficient on its own. A purely harmonic analysis may clarify the importance of the mystic chord and non-functional pitch organisation, but it may understate the role of gesture, texture, formal pacing, and pianistic embodiment. A purely philosophical reading may illuminate Scriabin's mystical and Theosophical interests, but it risks overinterpreting the score if musical evidence is not first established independently. A purely performance-oriented account may offer useful practical advice, but it can become detached from the work's larger formal and aesthetic design. The contribution of the present study lies in bringing these dimensions together while maintaining clear distinctions among the different kinds of evidence on which they depend.

The formal analysis demonstrates that the Fifth Sonata compresses sonata procedure into a continuous single-movement design. Its coherence depends not on Classical tonal opposition alone, but on recurring gestures, changing textures, tempo-character markings, registral processes, and controlled intensification. The introductory framing complex, the *Presto con allegrezza* primary area, the *imperioso* repeated-chord writing, the *Meno vivo* lyrical region, the two transformational spans, the intensified return, and the terminal climactic coda all contribute to a large-scale process of contrast, recurrence, and accumulation. The musical examples support this reading by documenting specific score features rather than by functioning as decorative illustrations.

The aesthetic discussion has argued that Scriabin's Theosophical, mystical, and tone-colour interests provide important interpretive contexts, but not automatic explanations for individual musical events. The sonata's trajectory may invite broader associations with aspiration, intensification, or heightened consciousness, especially when placed beside Scriabin's documented aesthetic ambitions. However, such associations remain interpretive readings, not facts proven by the score. This distinction is essential for avoiding unsupported metaphysical claims while still acknowledging the intellectual and artistic environment in which the work was conceived.

The performance-practice discussion extends the analysis from score to realisation. The sonata's structural features are also pianistic problems: irregular opening gestures require clarity and energy; chordal themes must be voiced above flowing accompaniment; repeated-chord textures require physical efficiency; lyrical passages require resonance without loss of continuity; and the closing climax requires long-range pacing rather than immediate maximum intensity. Historical evidence concerning Scriabin's flexible and colouristic pianism supports a general orientation toward elasticity, nuance, and resonance, but it does not prescribe a single correct interpretation. The recommendations offered here are therefore score-grounded performance reflections rather than reconstructions of Scriabin's exact playing.

The broader methodological value of this study lies in its evidence hierarchy. By distinguishing score-demonstrable observations, source-supported historical claims, cautious interpretive readings, and authorial performance recommendations, the article attempts to preserve both analytical richness and scholarly restraint. This approach is particularly necessary in Scriabin studies, where the music's philosophical aura can easily encourage claims that exceed the available evidence. The goal is not to remove mystery, colour, or aesthetic ambition from the Fifth Sonata, but to discuss them in a way that remains accountable to the score and to documented sources.

In conclusion, Piano Sonata No. 5 stands as a concentrated example of Scriabin's late style: formally compressed, harmonically non-functional, texturally volatile, philosophically suggestive, and pianistically demanding. Its significance lies not in any single analytical category but in the way musical structure, aesthetic imagination, and performance realisation converge. The sonata's continuous design invites interpretation across these domains, yet its most persuasive readings are those that keep evidence and interpretation clearly differentiated. Such an approach allows the work to be understood both as a score-based musical structure

and as part of Scriabin's broader artistic world, while avoiding the unsupported claims that have sometimes complicated the reception of his late music.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University (Grant No. R69A008, Fiscal Year 2026).

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