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 ‘A SCIENCE OF TONAL LOVE’? DRIVE AND DESIRE IN  
 TWENTIETH-CENTURY HARMONY: THE EROTICS OF SKRYABIN
 

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Being is not something separate from the desire for life. It is the very same desire but objectified. Wish [desire] is the inner aspect of being. The nature of life (action) is the desire for the other, the *one*, and *nothing else*. The consequence of desiring (experience) creates time. Action is the surge or lift of life. Surge (activity) in the highest degree is ecstasy. Absolute being is ecstasy ... . Ecstasy is the highest rising of activity.<sup>1</sup>

A drop in the ocean of Skryabin’s writings on desire, this compact little extract proves human longing and its fulfilment to be amongst the composer’s central philosophical topics. Richard Taruskin diagnosed this obsession in *Scriabin and the Superhuman: a Millennial Essay*, and, allowing it to spill over into Skryabin’s music, appealed to the Wagnerian correspondence between metaphysical suspensions of desire and musical deferrals of the tonic chord.<sup>2</sup> However, Taruskin reads the situation in the composer’s later works as a breakdown of this very desiring apparatus and asserts that the Wagnerian trope no longer sustains us in Skryabin’s late harmonic vortex, which now ‘extinguishes the desiring ego’. Although Taruskin situates Skryabin’s fate – his ‘knowing loss in the power of music to represent desire’ (Taruskin 1995, p. 17) – as a complement to Igor Stravinsky’s, itself symptomatic of a broader collapse of subjectivity in the early part of the twentieth century, the present article’s alternative line of inquiry adumbrates ways in which desire can be rehabilitated in a quite separate (and arguably more direct) sense within Skryabin’s own harmonic structures. The solution espoused here, whilst mindful of the cultural-philosophical innovations of *fin-de-siècle* Russia, benefits from theoretical developments in the intervening century and proposes that our understanding of both Skryabin’s control of harmony and his philosophical worldview can be enriched by the psychoanalytic concept of drive. I thus intend to (1) interrogate the nature of desire by inviting more refined psychoanalytical terminologies, off-setting it particularly with the Freudian theory of drives, (2) use this distinction to explore Skryabin’s own conception of human longing in both his nomenclature and its philosophical application and (3) allow these points of reference to coordinate a detailed reading of Skryabin’s dense harmonic language by offering a comprehensive theory of how drives rather than desire can sustain musical discourse both in

recent analytical theory and in my own speculative advances. I hope that, by petitioning the theories of Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, my approach may widen the space in which modern psychoanalytic theory and music can cooperate (a space most recently opened out by theorists such as Slavoj Žižek and Michel Poizat),<sup>3</sup> whilst additionally refining our conception of this most eccentric of composers and his equally idiosyncratic music.

### Skryabin and the Psychoanalytic Drive

Freud contended that all human behaviour, emotional or otherwise, was guided by forces which he called 'drives' (*Triebe*) and which were to become the cornerstone of psychoanalysis. Without positing a holistic theory of emotion *per se*, he maintained that the primary drives were responsible for determining the character of the 'affective response' (the term *Affekt* is used almost synonymously with 'emotion').<sup>4</sup> Obeying the mandates only of the pleasure principle, these 'forces which we assume to exist behind the tensions caused by the needs of the id' (Freud 1957, vol. 14, p. 148) operate on a tension–discharge basis that essentially corresponds to displeasure–pleasure and that determines, to some extent, the nature of our conduct.

In 1915, the same year that Freud published his monumental *Drives and Their Vicissitudes*, Skryabin faced his untimely death, which brought his long-term vision of apocalyptic mysticism – the *Mysterium* – to a halt. This cataclysmic *Gesamtkunstwerk* was not only to incorporate music, dancing, perfume and visual art, but was also to embrace the domains of philosophy and psychology, with which the composer had long been fascinated. In 1904 his wife, Vera, recorded that 'Sasha reads a lot of philosophy and psychology and thinks all the while of his future compositions' (Bowers 1996, vol. 2, p. 72), and Skryabin's journals from this time also contain extensive paraphrases of the experimental psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. Skryabin claimed that, 'by analysing oneself psychologically, by studying oneself, man can explain everything, including the whole cosmos' (Bowers 1974, p. 62). Nevertheless, although Freud's essays were rapidly disseminated amongst the Russian intelligentsia, evidence of their direct influence on Skryabin is lacking.<sup>5</sup> It seems probable, therefore, that Skryabin had to find his own path into psychoanalytical drive theory. That a primary source should have been Arthur Schopenhauer's book *The World as Will and Representation*, which Skryabin discovered in 1892, seems fitting; this was the same spring from which Freud himself drew.<sup>6</sup> The composer undoubtedly took Schopenhauer's concept of the will very much to heart, even if he viewed it from a rather oblique, Wagnerian angle.<sup>7</sup> Although the poet Viacheslav Ivanov's essay 'Skryabin's View of Art' asserts that Skryabin 'musically re-created the movements of the will' (Ivanov 2003, p. 223), Skryabin's own solipsistic worldview held that '[t]he Spirit ... creates its own World by its own creative Will' (Bowers 1996, vol. 1, p. 341). Skryabin thus considered will to be a self-positing force, and this same force fed into his discussion of 'desire': 'I am life's palpitation. I am desire. I am

a dream ... . Desires in me are vague, and dreams dim. I do not yet know how to create you. I only know that I wish [desire] to create. I create already. The desire to create is creation ... . Life is activity, striving, struggle ... . Oh life. Oh creative surge. Oh all-creating desire' (Bowers 1996, vol. 2, p. 54).<sup>8</sup> But from a modern psychoanalytical purview, the clarity of the word 'desire' in such statements is compromised by its qualifications as 'surge', 'palpitation' and 'vague'. As Skryabin's biographer, Faubion Bowers, mused, 'How easy to translate Scriabin's words "wish" and "desire" into "drives". Scriabin's worldview falls easily into the linguistics of "compulsion" and "obsession"' (Bowers 1996, vol. 2, p. 68). And indeed, a brief elucidation of the distinction between 'drive' and 'desire' as they pertain to psychoanalytic theory supports this highly apposite (if intuitive rather than psychoanalytically informed) observation.

In Freudian terms, drives – a refinement of Schopenhauer's will – are unconscious, blind energies that lead a subject in many directions in the vain hope of satisfaction. On the surface, the Freudian drive's goal is simply to attain the arbitrary object it reaches out to, but a more nuanced version of its *modus operandi* was articulated in the seminars of Jacques Lacan. In Lacan's *Deconstruction of the Drive* (1964), the French term *but* is translated variously as 'goal' or 'aim'. The aim is the path that the drive actually takes, a path which leads towards an object. But this object (which is always imaginary) remains ungraspable, and the drive is forced to retreat to its unbearable state of dissatisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Following its aim, the drive intersects the process of desire that, in a sense, is the subject's unconscious interpretation of its drive pressure as it draws itself towards the object it latches onto. The drive's true goal, however, as revealed by Lacan, is located in this failure to achieve its aim; the goal is (and was from the very beginning) simply the perpetuation of an orbital motion around the object.

Lacan's version of the passage from the multivalent drive towards an object-orientated economy of desire is complicated by his infamously abstruse and often cryptographic prose. But Kristeva – who adds much to drive theory, as we shall see – teases out this Lacanian progression and renders it more transparently: '[m]ore precisely and concretely, the subject's desire is founded on drives ... that remain unsatisfied, no matter what phantasmatic identifications desire may lead to ... . Desire's basis in drives will thus be dismissed and forgotten so that attention may be focussed on desire itself' (Kristeva 1984, p. 131). Kristeva underscores the crucial moment when the drive slips into the 'phantasmatic' structure of desire. The human desiring apparatus interprets the drive and attempts to resolve its excessive energies, but it ultimately closes itself off from the extreme force of the drive which had produced it. Such interpretation, for Lacan and his followers, is always a misrepresentation or misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the drive's true goal – the simple rotation of the object. Desire is thus an artificial and illusory process (although the illusions it entails are certainly necessary to sustain our psychic well-being) of misidentification of the drive, which is always left behind as a surplus, a remainder, after desire has

been articulated. The Lacanian cosmology of desire thus constitutes a fluid motion from drive into desire and (through failure) back again.

To be sure, a close reading of Skryabin's nomenclature – 'pulsation', 'urge', 'impulse', 'energy'<sup>10</sup> – confirms that material drive energy is evoked rather than imaginary, Lacanian, object-focussed desire. And Skryabin, like Lacan (and Schopenhauer before him), realised that the drive's pressure was interminable: 'I can honestly affirm that I always want something ... . This is the most important and inflexible sign of life ... . The man who wants nothing, definitely nothing, must die at once' (Bowers 1996, vol. 2, p. 102). Also like Lacan, Skryabin was clear that a plurality of 'yearnings' ('drives') existed only in a productively antagonistic community with others: '[w]hen I have no desire I am nothing. The individual longing gives rise to all other yearnings, because it can exist only in relation to my other desires' (de Schloezer 1987, p. 204). Crucial insights into the economies of drive and desire are offered through a particularly illuminating instance in Skryabin's text for the *Poem of Ecstasy*. An aimless, libidinal flux has already been established when the word 'desire' is redefined as 'thirst for life'; its very aimlessness (found in certain key phrases such as 'unmindful of goals', 'endless change', 'purposeless' and even 'pure aimlessness') situates it within an economy of drives.<sup>11</sup> But in a moment of acute apperception, the solipsistic Spirit steps forward and attains enough self-consciousness to comprehend its own desiring mechanism:

It [the Spirit] knows that  
Which desired struggles  
It desired only,  
And events  
Assembled round  
This wish [desire]  
In harmonious order.<sup>12</sup>

The Spirit now comprehends its own libidinal current as a false 'assemblage'; it becomes its own psychoanalyst. For some, this 'assemblage' of desire may sound Deleuzian (and thus redolent of a philosopher who is generally at odds with Lacan's model of desire). For Deleuze, desire, as driven by the machinery of the unconscious, is not propelled by the need for an object of lack; rather, it aims to generate an assemblage (*agencement*) comprising the processes of its own production.<sup>13</sup> But the assemblage here – in this poem, which fully reveres the potency of the ever thirsty drive – registers an acknowledgement that desire's multifarious imaginary objects (solipsistically produced 'events', now assembled around the drive) are misrecognitions of pure drive energy. This deeply Lacanian message registers the transition from the aimless drive into the object-orientated structures of desire that fail (in this case, through conscious recognition) and return, once again, to the drive circuit. And, accepting Skryabin's tantalising invitation to read his music psychoanalytically – '[m]ost of my musical poems have a specific psychological content, but not all of them need programme notes'

(Bowers 1974, p. 108) – this study contends that such a motion from drive into desire (and back again through its failure) shares a fundamental homology not only with Skryabin's vision of the philosophical category of desire, but with his own idiosyncratic harmonic procedures.

### Drive in Music

Explorations of desire in music, although now deeply entrenched in the 'new musicology', can be problematic. The virtuosity with which musicologists explore the extramusical stimuli that music is deemed to reflect is not always matched by rigorous analytical explication. That said, Lawrence Kramer's study of *Tristan and Isolde* forms specific points of contact between Wagner's harmonic substance and his Schopenhauerian philosophy, locating a *Lust*-trope somewhere between *Tristan's* tensile chord progressions and Freud's *Three Essays in Sexuality*.<sup>14</sup> For Kramer, the perpetual suspension of desire is encapsulated in the fluid, libidinal fluctuations of the unstable, tritone-fuelled *Tristan* chord. A final release of harmonic pressure is found only through a B major cadence in the final throes of the opera. This corresponds precisely to Isolde's own satisfaction as she produces her ultimate fantasy of Tristan's transfiguration in order to escape the drive's interminable pressure. But, *pace* Kramer's Freudian reading, this fantasy is acutely Lacanian. Unlike material drive mechanisms, Lacanian desire is wrought through imagination and fantasy;<sup>15</sup> in this case, the fantasy is enacted in the first place as a vision of Tristan as a transmogrified hero, and in the second as a tonic chord whose 'arbitrary' nature (why a tonic of B, when the opera began in A minor and slipped so fluidly through so many keys?) exposes desire's fundamental, phantasmatic *méconnaissance* of drive energy.

Music theorists have long found drive in music, though without specific Freudian consequence. James Hepokoski specifically locates drive in certain formal functions of sonata structures, but other theorists use synonymous terminologies in relation to many factors of musical experience.<sup>16</sup> Schenker himself was particularly explicit in 1935, claiming that 'the fundamental line signifies motion, striving towards a goal, and ultimately the completion of the course. In this sense we perceive our own life-impulse in the motion of the fundamental line, a full analogy to our inner life' (Brower 2000, p. 333). His Russian contemporary Gregory Conjus discussed harmony's 'act of creative will' in 1933, using the term 'pulse wave' to refer to both Nietzsche's 'will to power' and Bergson's *élan vital*.<sup>17</sup> Also in Soviet analysis, Alexander Milka applied the Russian word *tyagatenie* in the 1960s, which, as Ildar Khannanov explains, means 'drawing to', 'need for resolution' and 'urge'.<sup>18</sup> In our more familiar analytical traditions, we find Ernst Kurth discussing 'waves of energy' whilst viewing chromaticism as will – 'an urge towards motion' and 'potential energy' (1991, p. 106). And Leonard Meyer explored musical 'tendencies' (1973, p. 95),<sup>19</sup> while Fred Lerdahl devised mathematical models of calculating

harmonic 'tension' (2001, p. 143). Particularly apposite for a discussion of the Freudian drive, then, is Daniel Harrison's conceptualization of dominant-to-tonic motion as a 'discharge' of tension (1994, p. 73). For an application of this kind of language to an account of post-tonal repertoire, see also David Lewin's theories of tonal transformation with the generative 'urges' and 'lusts' (1982–3, p. 341) which propel a harmonic unit to enter transformational networks: 'I find it suggestive to think of these generative lusts as musical tensions and/or potentialities which later events of the piece will resolve and/or realize to greater or lesser extents' (Lewin 1982–3, p. 341). Seemingly the project of bridging the chasm between music and the psychoanalytical drive has long been under way.

Although music theory has shown that such drives operate in various parameters – melody, rhythm, voice leading, and so on – the present study will be confined to harmony, and specifically to one of its fundamental building blocks: the dominant seventh chord. In music, as Rameau claimed, the need for a dissonant sonority to resolve drives all tonal music (Christensen 1993, p. 120). The dominant function, most fully represented by the dominant seventh chord, encompasses one of the most elemental forces in music: the tritone, the *diablos in musica*. For centuries this has encapsulated the essence of the dominant's gravitational pull to the tonic, and, according to Richmond Browne, this 'rarest interval' is the strongest key-defining unit (1981, p. 3). The tritone is thus the drive *par excellence* (and was appropriately repressed during the Middle Ages). But this interval is only the skeleton of the dominant structure. Freud claims that the drives have no 'quality'; rather, they simply possess differing 'quantities' – they are merely a play of intensities.<sup>20</sup> Several manifestations of the dominant function constructed around the tritone could perhaps be regarded as drives of various strengths. And Skryabin absorbed many variants of the dominant function from the nineteenth century's rich harmonic lexicon. We find dominant chords with augmented fifths (intensifying the upward pull from  $\hat{2}$  to  $\hat{3}$ ), chords with flattened fifths (intensifying the downward pull from  $\hat{2}$  to  $\hat{1}$ ) and seventh chords with missing tones or to which ninths, elevenths and/or thirteenthths have been added. Each of these altered sonorities exhibits a greater or lesser degree of dominant pressure. Furthermore, the spacing of pitches, particularly the bass pitch, can influence the quantity of a dominant chord's tension. Thus, according to Steve Larson, '[t]he absence of a root-position dominant immediately before the tonic weakens the drive from V to I' (1987, p. 421). Contextually, such chords are shaped into a specific dominant-to-tonic drive, but things are rarely this straightforward in Skryabin's music. Although the dissonant dominant chord is often regarded as the backbone of Skryabin's musical form, its status as a carrier of tension in his late works is somewhat equivocal. Robert Morgan, while illustrating that 'Scriabin had been able to preserve at least some degree of tonal definition' and that 'despite the increasing avoidance of resolution, one is usually able to infer what the resolution should be', goes on to claim that

[t]he moment arrives in Scriabin's evolution ... when the dominant-type sonorities completely lose their functional subordination to an inferred background tonic. The dominant, one might say, has moved deeper into the structural background to become an 'absolute' sonority in its own right, with a meaning no longer dependent upon its relationship to a simpler, more stable structure. (Morgan 1984, p. 454)

Taruskin, too, claims that '[i]n his later music Scriabin would indeed let the emphasis on the dominant function go, and retain the symmetrical interval cycle, so that the putative tonic is literally in a state of equilibrium with its shadows, and can claim priority only in rhythmic (or dynamic, or sheer statistical) ways' (1988, p. 156). James Baker (1983), by contrast, suggests a tonally conservative reading in his seminal analysis of *Engime*, Op. 52 No. 2, in which he not only establishes a tonal background to the ostensibly atonal flow of harmonies, but also maintains that this background prolongs a decorated dominant sonority which, despite its elaborate chromaticism, is experienced tonally. Baker's analytical strategy allows Skryabin's transitional harmony to hold on to a tonal background for all it is worth, but this approach faces challenges in Skryabin's later pieces, a body of work which offers a wealth of examples of atonality so prime for Fortean pitch-class-set analysis (Forte 1973). It is the precarious balance between tonal functionality and harmonic stasis that this examination of the psychoanalytic drive seeks to address.

Kristeva, an important advocate of Lacanian psychoanalysis, formulates the drive operations within a subject's pre-symbolic realm as a *chora*. The *chora* – a term, borrowed from Plato, meaning 'receptacle' – is the realm in which drives proliferate around the maternal body: '[d]rives involve ... energy discharges that connect and orientate the body to the mother. We must emphasise that drives are always already ambiguous' (Kristeva 1984, p. 27). And, crucially for us, these drives are heteronymous. Kristeva 'is careful to point out that her interest with regard to the Freudian theory of drives lies not in their "fundamental dichotomy ..." but in their heteronymy' (Lechte and Margaroni 2004, p. 21). The drives are part of one heteronymous whole, existing only as ambiguity-laden simultaneities which occupy a joint position. Moreover, as in Lacanian theory, the drives do not progress organically between each other; they are not part of a teleological chain but share only topological community. And, under certain conditions, this can pertain to musical, harmonic substance. Nevertheless, a preliminary response might be to outline the fundamental ambiguity even of the single isolated dominant seventh configuration. This chord, without strong contextual support, could well represent an enharmonically altered German sixth chord and thus indicate an entirely different tonic altogether; it therefore defies any single interpretation of its impulses.

That said, the well-worn  $V^7 \rightarrow I$  motion is certainly the most normative discharge route for these seventh tensions. But in Skryabin's music, where these chords arise in such dense proliferation, our sense of tonic is slippery at best. A

fresh look at Skryabin’s most publicised sonority – the mystic chord – produces a perhaps more refined musical parallel to this Kristevan vision of the drive’s lack of teleological clarity. Brought to light after its use in *Prometheus*, this distinguished chord complex flourishes in most of Skryabin’s late miniatures. Like Wagner’s *Tristan* chord or Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* chord, this enigmatic sonority draws close analytical scrutiny that yields countless interpretations. It has been described variously by Jay Reise (1983) as a nexus between whole-tone and octatonic collections, by Leonid Sabaneyev ([1925] 2003) as a concentration of upper partials and by Peter Sabbagh (2003) as a sexed-up dominant complex. Skryabin’s own analysis – ‘this is not a dominant chord but a basic chord’ (quoted in Sabbagh 2003, p. 70) – was hardly illuminating in this regard. And no wonder. Analytical hypostatisation surrounding chords such as these can lead us to overlook the deeper harmonic principles which they exemplify; we should instead use them as a gateway to Skryabin’s full harmonic universe. Dismantling the chord opens up a more expansive play of tensions which pull its vertically differentiated segments in many potential directions; and, in light of the reading that follows, such a procedure can be seen to reflect the unconscious multivalent drive mechanisms which Freud, Lacan and Kristeva found to be at work in the human psyche.

The complex can be conceived as a polytonal network of at least two dominant-seventh configurations which embody drives in divergent keys. Readings of such chords are not entirely new, of course; even in Schoenberg’s *Harmonielehre*, the composer explains how a fully scored eleven-pitch chord in *Erwartung* contains elements which suggest resolution in diverse directions, each tendency defined by register and orchestration. Schoenberg explains that eschewing resolution in no way diminishes the chord’s need to resolve: ‘[t]hat it [the resolution] does not come can do no more damage here than when the resolution is omitted in simple harmonies’ (Schoenberg 1978, p. 418). As for the psychoanalytic drive, this need is all about potential. But in the most conventional presentation of Skryabin’s famous chord (grounded on C), two accidentals are sounded: F# and Bb (Fig. 1), which reach out of C major into both its dominant and its subdominant regions. Along a line of fifths, they present the first deviations from the major scale:

F# | B–E–A–D–G–C–F | Bb

Fig. 1 Breakdown of Skryabin’s mystic chord

Mystic chord on C

V<sup>7</sup> I  
G major

V<sup>7</sup> I  
F major

Exploring bitonality in Szymanowski's Op. 50 Mazurkas, Ann McNamee unveils the *Podhalean* mode, a Polish folk scale made up of pitches identical to those of the mystic chord – in other words, a modified C scale: C–D–E–F#–G–A–Bb. She further demonstrates that Szymanowski's bitonal music is facilitated by the circles of fifths inherent within this scale, commenting, '[I]t is remarkable that neither pitch serves to stabilize the tonic; rather, harmonic support shifts to V and IV' (McNamee 1985, p. 64).<sup>21</sup> This dualist reading may well bring to mind Harrison's return to Riemannian *Funktionstheorie*, where the dominant and the subdominant are conceptualised as bifurcations of the tonic function.<sup>22</sup> A focus on tonally active harmonic units affords a refreshingly conservative environment in which to analyse Skryabin's music amid a climate of whole-tone/octatonic and even proto-serial explanations.<sup>23</sup> Skryabin's mystic chord is likewise poised between two dominant seventh structures (as shown in Fig. 1) which reach towards the subdominant and the dominant via a C<sup>7</sup> element (leading to an F triad) and a D<sup>7</sup> element (leading to a G triad). This inner tension certainly calls for deeper exploration.

I use the term 'drives' to describe these constituent yet conflicting dominant-seventh tensions because such small components, full of potential, form no part of Classical or even Romantic style. Because they conflict synchronically, there can be no expectation of (or desire for) a single tonal object – a tonic key. Rather, they heteronymously stretch in alternative directions. This procedure distinguishes Skryabin from his predecessors. The harmonic fabric of *Tristan*, for example, is woven of chords which perpetually defer a tonic resolution. Although such a tonic may be forever elided in the fluctuating modulatory current of something akin to Newcomb's 'wandering tonality – recitative secco' (Newcomb 1981, p. 50), a single local tonic is generally implied at any given moment. For instance, subscribing to the Anglo-American reading of the *Tristan* chord as a French sixth accented by appoggiaturas, the opening bars of *Tristan* adopt the tonic of A.<sup>24</sup> Apropos of my earlier discussion of desire, such a chord, whichever key it is in, thus assumes the character of an imaginary object of satisfaction. While this object mutates as the sequence passes through a string of different keys, desire (*qua* an interpretation of drive energy) is mapped in the work through perpetual rerouting of the potent, yet unstable, harmonic forces. Keys (*qua* tonic objects) change, but the desiring process remains, although it fails to satisfy the energy that drives it: 'each release of desire, no matter how entrancing, becomes a further accumulation, a slippage of desire beyond its object' (Kramer 1990, p. 149).<sup>25</sup> In Skryabin's harmonic motion, by contrast, multiple potential drives exert force simultaneously, routed through a polytonal body.

Of course, in the analytical arena, polytonality is a somewhat thorny issue. It has been so ever since the publication of Darius Milhaud's seminal 1923 essay, 'Polytonality and Atonality', in *Revue musicale*, which formulated the combinations of chords and melodies capable of creating a polytonal universe. Suspicions are often raised about polytonality's ontological status, particularly regarding its

auditory potential. In Skryabin studies, Baker dismissed such a concept as a cognitive impossibility, earning him the reproach of Taruskin for his sweeping reduction of Varvara Dernova's highly nuanced system to a crude form of polytonality.<sup>26</sup> As Taruskin's complaint highlights, many and varied tonal strategies coalesce beneath the polytonal umbrella, and recent scholarship has fortunately begun to explore the multifarious disciplines that shelter there. In a recent issue of *Music Theory Spectrum*, Peter Kaminsky offers an excellent introduction to problems of polytonality, citing Baker's complaint – itself echoing Milton Babbitt and Paul Hindemith – that it is impossible for a listener to perceive two tonics at the same time. Taking the opposite view, he expands upon recent cognitive studies, arguing that a listener is, in fact, capable of attending to two simultaneous pitch centers.<sup>27</sup> Through his analyses of works by Ravel and Debussy, Kaminsky demonstrates that, under certain conditions, and judging each case on its own merits, nuanced compositional techniques can posit separate tonal centres which orientate us polytonally. These techniques carefully outlay tonal centres in dialogic progression to allow each new moment to be informed by its predecessor. He shows that the relative strengths of vying key centres can fluctuate depending on such factors as bass prominence, melodic interaction and cadencing. Kaminsky's work may make room for a fresh navigation of Skryabin's own fluid, polytonal key relations, which perpetually change over the course of a piece or even during a single phrase or bar. Harrison's own analysis of selected works by Milhaud provides a similarly fruitful method of gauging the balance between presentations of separate bitonal elements, through his analysis of '5-cycle' (Harrison 1997, p. 407) pitch-class sets, in which bitonal experience depends upon factors such as orchestration or the 'zone of separation' (*ibid.*, p. 401) between pitch-class materials. By examining bitonality's operations from a position interior to the prevailing tonal systems ('[b]ittonality in this piece, when it appears as an obvious structural component, essentially results from a double projection of 5-cycle and related sets' [Harrison 1997, p. 399]), Harrison also inclines towards a refutation of one of the other standard criticisms of polytonal theory. Arthur Berger's influential analysis of Stravinsky (1968) exposed the epochal *Petrushka* chord, previously interpreted as a 'bitonal' deployment of simultaneously articulated C and F# tritone-related triads, as an octatonic complex. Insightful though his reading is, to my mind it exemplifies a systemic analytical flaw, whereby an exploration of a work's nuanced bitonal impulses is obfuscated by an appeal to a broader system of tonal governance.<sup>28</sup> Harrison's strategy, which can be seen as the converse of Berger's, implies that bitonality has a propensity to break through fissures in the prevailing pitch-organisation strategies; this too may light a way into analyses of Skryabin, for whom harmonic language is delicately poised between the diatonic, the octatonic, the whole-tone, the mystic, and so on, yet resists confinement to any single set.

Of course, irrespective of the cognitive crisis of polytonality, critics work in full acknowledgement that composers chose to construct their music along these

lines. Kaminsky cites Baker's admission that polytonality 'does seem to reflect the way that certain composers put their music together' (Kaminsky 2004, p. 238),<sup>29</sup> and the spirit of polytonality certainly pervades Russian music, shining through in Russia's theoretical tradition as well as its compositional practice. Analytically, Soviet theory revelled in musical celebrations of multiple key strata, despite the chequered European heritage of the word 'polytonality'. That said, the term's application to Skryabin's music is highly unconventional. Boleslav Yavorsky – Skryabin's earliest analyst – conceived of 'dual modality', a theory adapted in the 1960s by Dernova and now the mainstay of Skryabin analysis,<sup>30</sup> in which the shared pitch-class content between a particular altered dominant chord and its T<sub>6</sub> variant balances the listener between the poles of a system of twin tonics. Despite Baker's implications to the contrary, this is no simple form of bitonality. In perhaps more Riemannian terms, Russia's analytical 'textbook' – Viktor Belyayev's *Musorgskii, Skryabin, Stravinskii* (1972) – contains a *Funktionstheorie* analysis of *The Poem of Ecstasy* that readily locates the T, S and D functions within a single chord. The value of such theories, irrespective of the issue of whether simultaneous key systems are cognitively possible, is the acknowledgement of multitudinous potential discharge paths that can operate within a single chord complex. This is, strictly speaking, not acutely polytonal in conception, although it undeniably comes close. Further, the malleable dominant seventh tensions I find within Skryabin's mystic chord – and, as I argue, in his general harmonic language – engage a dialectic between a listener's cognitive expectations for their discharge and the route they actually take: one listens to an unstable chord, forms an idea of how it may resolve and reacts accordingly when it takes an alternative discharge possibility, an experience which can be prescriptive for future incarnations of these chords.

The key to this, as gleaned from Kaminsky's analysis as well as Harrison's explorations, is the temporal unfolding of conflicting tonal forces, in this case, of tension–discharge patterns.<sup>31</sup> Daniel Chua recently proposed that perhaps polytonality in Stravinsky's 'Augurs' chord from *The Rite of Spring* could be 'understood as a semiotic theory' (Chua 2007, p. 72). He rightly claims that '[s]tock figures, such as the dominant seventh or a fundamental bass texture, are free-floating signifiers detached from their context' (*ibid.*); they function synecdochically as 'extroversive' (*ibid.*, p. 73) signifiers – analogous to "horn call", "aria" or "march" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, we are told that Stravinsky uses the various tonal elements of the chord to 'attack the foundations of the past' (*ibid.*). Although this may apply to Stravinsky's nihilistic sonority (vertically combining an E<sub>b</sub><sup>7</sup> chord and an F<sub>b</sub> triad), with its furious repetition, it is possible to hear Skryabin's sinewy mass of drive-based sonorities as the organic life force of a still sentient tonality, as evidenced by the irregular 'discharges' encountered in his viscous harmonic flow. Polytonal extroversive signifiers (dominant seventh chords), if carefully laid out in a tonal drama that nurtures the individual elements through the course of a piece, can thus reach inwards and reassert their position as 'introversive signs' (*ibid.*) of a functioning tonality. As with Stravinsky, the dominant

Ex. 1 Skryabin, *Poème*, Op. 71 No. 2

En rêvant, avec une grande douceur

*p* *dim.*

D7 — C7 — G#7 — D7 — C7 — D7 — G7 — F7

seventh drives under Skryabin’s control are deterritorialised, to be sure; but unlike in Stravinsky’s music, a process inherent within the drive itself – and which I will term ‘desire’ – enfolds them back into a tonal system.

### From Drive to Desire

Fluid voice-leading patterns ensure a constant fluctuation of harmonic drives, and their flexible discharges interact in ever novel ways. Skryabin’s late *Poème*, Op. 71 No. 2 (1914), commences with an inverted version of the mystic chord (Ex. 1); D<sup>7</sup> grounds the bass, and the C<sup>7</sup> (articulated by the pitches C, E and B<sup>b</sup>) is found faintly in the middle register (adopting the melodic E<sup>b</sup>).<sup>32</sup> While this latter drive is certainly less substantial, and its status as an auditory possibility doubtless hangs in the balance, it comes more forcefully into play at the point of discharge in its variation at bar 3. Notice how the chromatic F<sup>#</sup>–F<sup>b</sup>–E motion in the ‘tenor’ line (a voice exchange with the ‘alto’) now draws the C<sup>7</sup> into the lower region (the final beat of the bar consists of the pitches C, E and B<sup>b</sup>), and the chromatic D–C<sup>#</sup>–C of the ‘soprano’ melody commutes the C–F<sup>#</sup> tritone with its D<sup>7</sup> implication to the upper register. Skryabin immediately discharges both elements simultaneously: the upper tritone resolves inwards to the G–B thirds of a G chord, while the C<sup>7</sup> below resolves to an F<sup>7</sup>. The resultant elements of bar 4 form new interlocking dominant seventh drives.

However, notwithstanding the purposeful way in which the sonority’s component drives have been inverted through the inner E–F<sup>#</sup> voice exchange to prepare for the actual moment of change, because both drives discharge together, in this instance a more conventional (and perhaps more intuitive) interpretation could suggest that a single unstable chord has simply resolved to another equally unstable chord. To the contrary, however, supplementary examples from the repertoire prove these drive elements to be highly independent. In the Etude Op. 56 No. 4 (1908), the sturdy bass drives are sequentially disjointed (Ex. 2). Typically for Skryabin, the upper voice lays out additional drives. The C<sup>#</sup>–G tritone at the end of bar 1 resonates with the A below to form loosely an A<sup>7</sup> drive. This weak drive is strengthened through a discharge

## Ex. 2 Skryabin, Etude, Op. 56 No. 4

Presto

$A_7 \longrightarrow D_7$        $C_7 \longrightarrow F$        $E_b^7$   
 $F_7$      $B_7$        $G\#_7$        $D_7 \longrightarrow G_7$        $D\#_7$        $G_7$        $D\#_7$

inwards to the pitches D (C $\sharp$ ) and F $\sharp$  – to appearances, independently from the lower B $^7$  to G $\sharp^7$  motion. The discharge pattern is sequentially raised to yield a resolution of C $^7$  to F, but this instance now re-enacts the double discharge of the *Poème*, Op. 71 No. 2, only with the D $^7 \rightarrow G^7$  in the lower voice – upside down. Through illustrations such as this, component drives are more clearly laid out as active, individual (if polytonally presented) units – more than just free-floating signifiers.

This analysis has followed the fortunes of the small minority of drives which obey their innate inclinations. But countless disconnected ones are left unresolved; drives such as the opening F $^7$ , B $^7$  and G $\sharp^7$  and the later E $b^7$  do not come to fruition. This, of course, makes a perfect analogy with the human subject's psychological mechanisms, by which certain drives are ignored in favour of the stronger urges which find expression in the object-orientated networks of desire. But how do objects of desire emerge? Such pieces are set in a narrative framework in which a single drive is selected from out of the mass and unravelled along the temporal axis. This path is indicated, albeit vaguely, by the local discharges shown above – the movement around the circle of fifths. Through this sequence, tonal objects (i.e. tonic chords) begin to materialise and are consolidated towards the close of pieces. In Op. 56 No. 4, a certain left-hand drive on E $b$  of bar 17 (one ignored in the earlier stages of the piece; see Ex. 3) is superseded by an A $b^7$  in the subsequent bar. The D $b^7$  and G $b$  continue this sequence of discharging dominant seventh drives, progressing by fifths. The whole pattern is immediately repeated, and on both occasions the G $b$  chord's consonance with the right hand's pitches produces a pure triad (despite the chromatic appoggiatura in the second iteration). The gesture is then retroactively consolidated as a VI $^7$ –II $^7$ –V $^7$ –I progression.

After a reminiscence of the opening phrase, the piece closes with a V–I bass progression, although the D $b^7$  is clearly preserved above the final G $b$  bass. Notwithstanding these traces of satisfaction, the ever illusory object of tonal desire (G $b$ ) is therefore left unattained in the closing moments. This miniature circle-of-fifths progression, with its newfound object of focus (G $b$ ), also stamps its authority on the opening bars, for when they are repeated towards the close of the work,

## Ex. 3 Skryabin, Etude, Op. 56 No. 4, bars 17–31

the D<sup>7</sup> upon which the phrase originally closed is now invested with new meaning: it is now the dominant of the G<sup>b</sup> which has been selected from out of the amorphous mass of drives. The insertion of two silent bars further allows us to reflect upon this new development. From the many loose, pulsating drive patterns in the opening bars, then, a single one has been selected to coordinate the tonal progress of the piece: drive has been sublimated into desire.

Bartók – a composer who warmly embraced polytonality – offers his explanation of the listener’s desire to interpret an overload of polytonal stimuli: ‘[p]olytonality exists only for the eye when one looks at such music. But our mental hearing again will select one key as a fundamental key, and will project the tones of the other keys in relation to the one selected ... it will simplify matters by reducing the maze of keys to one principal key’ (Bartók 1976, pp. 365–6). While Bartók’s intuitive theory may be rudimentary, he precisely replicates the narrative process which Skryabin composes into his musical form. But although, for Bartók, this selection of a ‘fundamental key’ from amongst multiple polytonal choices was the responsibility of the listener, it is Skryabin himself, assuming the role of coordinator of our musical desires, who guides the ear through the ‘maze’ of drives as they draw towards their tonic object.

### *Deux morceaux, Op. 57: Désir and Caresse dansée*

*Désir* and *Caresse dansée*, the two works that comprise the *Deux morceaux*, Op. 57, are two of Skryabin's avowedly erotic miniatures. Invigorated by the success of the orchestral *Poem of Ecstasy* of 1908, the composer described these newly composed short pieces as 'new ways of making love' (Bowers 1996, vol. 2, p. 163). The works function symbiotically for a variety of reasons, principal among which is their mutual refraction of a shared opening chord. *Tristan*-esque in nature, this sonority comprises both perfect and augmented fourths and forms the upper portion of Skryabin's mystic chord (above a hypothetical bass D). *Désir* (Ex. 4) consists of a mere fourteen bars and contains a dense network of internal repetitions; the very first bar is repeated and echoed by a cadence-like figure in bars 3–4; bar 5 repeats bar 4. Analysis reveals that the piece is built from a clear transposition design (Fig. 2) in which regular phrases are transposed, often sequentially, by fourths and fifths ( $T_5$  and  $T_7$ ).<sup>33</sup> This flexible fourth–fifth motion allows a degree of tonal functionality that is in some ways precluded from Skryabin's later works, which almost exclusively employ minor-third and tritone patterns ( $T_3$ ,  $T_6$  and  $T_9$ ). With  $T_5$ – $T_7$  as the ruling principle, then, bars 1–5 are transposed in bars 6–10: bar 6 (the equivalent of bar 1) is transposed at  $T_7$ , and bar 7 (the equivalent of bar 2) is presented at  $T_5$ . The resulting cadence is then expanded and emphasised in bars 11–14. A similarly conventional phrase structure governs the longer *Caresse dansée*, where the basic unit is a two-bar phrase, chromatically repeated a semitone lower (Ex. 5). Notwithstanding their 'mechanical' transposition scheme, the harmonic materials actually flow into each other beautifully with their delicate, descending voice leading.

Transcending the conventionality of these pieces' phrase structures, however, is their sense of harmonic growth. As we navigate these pieces, it becomes possible to trace an entire tonal plan back to their shared opening sonority. Because of the plurality of its drives, the chord resists interpretation according to a single function, but its conflict of tensions unfolds temporally and propels a search for tonal clarity. Shared harmonic practices and threads which the second piece picks up from the first allow these two miniatures to be heard as two interconnected movements of a single work.<sup>34</sup> In this respect, the search for tonal clarity runs through both: as listeners start to home in on specific teleological tonal patterns (typically circles of fifths), divergent drives approach musical desire, becoming ever more object orientated.

The opening chord of both pieces could be categorised in various conventional ways as either the upper segment of the mystic chord (as explained earlier) or as a dominant thirteenth with an absent bass D. However, such labels tell us very little about how the chord actually functions. To my mind, this chord contains drives that are destined to play key roles in each work's tonal drama. Thus Op. 57's *dramatis personae* are:

Ex. 4 Skryabin, *Désir*, Op. 57

The musical score for Ex. 4, Skryabin's *Désir*, Op. 57, is presented in five systems. The first system begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The second system includes a *poco cresc.* marking. The third system starts at measure 6. The fourth system starts at measure 9 and includes another *poco cresc.* marking. The fifth system starts at measure 12 and features an *8va* marking above the right-hand part. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs.

Fig. 2 Skryabin, *Désir*: transposition structure

bars 1–5:	x	x	y	z	z
bars 6–10:	$x^{T_7}$	$x^{T_5}$	$y^T$	$z^{T_5}$	$z^{T_5}$
bars 11–14:	Coda				

Ex. 5 Opening bars of Skryabin, *Cresse dansée*

### 1. $D^7$ tritone drive

One might initially be wary of interpreting the opening chord as a dominant seventh on D merely on the basis of the left hand's C–F $\sharp$  tritone. But such an interpretation is soon validated in *Désir* when the tritone discharges onto the ensuing, much fuller drive on G: the upper melodic C $\sharp$  acts as an appoggiatura to D to yield a complete  $G^7$  drive on the second beat, which now consolidates the previous tritone as a  $D^7$  drive. Carefully prepared cadences are certainly *not* the harmonic currency; rather, we are offered an abundance of conflicting drives which regulate chord-to-chord motion by sometimes the faintest intimations. Although this new  $G^7$  clearly concretises the preceding  $D^7$  element, it is removed as a teleological goal-post by means of its seventh, which implies a new tonic of C. The label 'V' can hardly confine the opening chord's harmonic function; rather, the  $D^7$  implication is relegated to 'V of V' as we are pushed backwards along a circle of fifths, and the tonic resolution remains slippery and elusive.

### 2. $A\flat^7$ tritone drive

If the C–F $\sharp$  tritone embodies a  $D^7$  chord, it could equally represent an  $A\flat^7$  chord if the tritone is heard as C–G $\flat$ . Although not immediately realised,

this implication is explored in bar 8's discharge from  $A\flat^7$  to  $D\flat^7$  (predominantly in the left hand). The potential is fulfilled in the beginning of *Caresse dansée*, whose opening chord immediately moves to  $A\flat^7$  to give the ambiguous tritone its vital coordinates.

### 3. $C^{\flat 7/5}$ drive

Although perhaps a counterintuitive interpretation in this instance, the alto B can act as a *Tristan*-esque appoggiatura that 'resolves' to  $A\sharp$  ( $B\flat$ ). From this standpoint, a  $C^7$  chord is offered, whose diminished fifth makes it one of Skryabin's most characteristic sonorities. In this chord lies the basis of Dernova's analytical system, whereby the dominant seventh with diminished fifth is shown to contain identical pitch-class content when a  $T_6$  operation is performed (Dernova 1968); this is her much-discussed 'tritone link'.

### 4. $F\sharp^{\flat 7/5}$ drive

Applying a  $T_6$  procedure to the  $C^{\flat 7/5}$  chord thus yields an  $F\sharp^{\flat 7/5}$ , guiding us towards an alternative tonic of B. An idiosyncrasy of both drives 3 and 4 is their double identity as French sixths. In the present context, once again taking the  $A\sharp$  as more focal than the B, a French sixth in the key of E major is indicated. This should ideally lead to a dominant harmony on B and progress to an E major chord. This, we must remind ourselves, is how the *Vorspiel* from *Tristan and Isolde*, so beloved by Skryabin, flows. In *Tristan*, the progression moved from a French sixth to an  $E^7$  (V of A minor). Of course, although Wagner's enterprise was to encapsulate desire, a mechanism which is orientated toward a single object at the expense of others, Skryabin presents a preternatural drive-based economy, which is why he does not offer any single pathway out of the harmonic conflict at this early stage except through the most veiled allusions. Such is hinted in the right hand of bar 1 of *Désir* as the chromatic cells ( $A-A\sharp-B$  and  $C\sharp-D-D\sharp$ ) reach the  $D\sharp$ , underpinned by a B. A linear tritone drive ( $A-B-D\sharp$ ) emphasises the dominant of E, and, to be sure, an E chord is embodied in the resulting open fifths, E-B. The same E-B pair that was revealed in the opening chord is now reconstituted as a pseudo-tonic. In some ways, the French sixth is something of a misnomer, owing to its constitutional synonymy with the  $V^{\flat 7/5}$  drive (in terms of pitch-class content), which discharges in the same way. This discussion serves merely to highlight its potential function as an auxiliary dominant ('V of V' rather than simply 'V') which further defers the object of desire along the circle of fifths. This interpretation also illustrates the lack of fixity in the goal of the dominant drive.

Now, any of these drive types could easily embody pure desire if they were spread out into a syntactical harmonic phrase which formed a path to a tonic object. But in the context of such an ambiguous moment, it is impossible to process the complex drive data and predict a temporal course. The narrative of these Op. 57 pieces is the selection of the individual drive and its transformation into a

teleological tonal desire. To this end each drive from the opening chord plays a part in the piece's linear development.

Drives 1 and 2 exert their pressure in the harmonic syntax of the initial phrases. As noted, drive 1's tritone is consolidated as  $D^7$  (by means of its approach to  $G^7$ ) in the very first measure of *Désir*, but this is immediately suspended in bar 3 to pave the way for a pseudo-perfect cadence in the key of  $A\flat$ . Incidentally, this  $A\flat$  contains a seventh ( $G\flat$ ), thus giving voice to drive 2. Yet bars 3–4 cadentially reconfirm a potential G tonic, although its dominant ( $D^7$ ) is retained in the resolution. This is naturally reminiscent of the close of the Etude Op. 56 No. 4, with its bass cadential motion from  $D\flat^7$  to  $G\flat$ , while the tense upper harmonies are reluctant to fully resolve. Drives 3 and 4 – the  $\flat_5^7$  drives on C and  $F\sharp$  – take hold very forcefully in *Désir*. To begin with, bar 4 presents the C triad with additional  $F\sharp$  above the G pedal, and when the dissonant pitch B chromatically descends to  $B\flat$ , both drives 3 and 4 are heard, although the C is decidedly more pronounced than  $F\sharp$ . However, the fact that the second half of the bar outlines a diminished triad (which, with its pitches  $D\sharp$ ,  $F\sharp$  and A, might represent  $B^7$ ) could also indicate a marginal fifth-based discharge from  $F\sharp^7$  to  $B^7$ . The same progression is drawn out in the following bar, the latter half of which is transposed upwards by a whole tone to reinforce the  $F\sharp^7$  chord with the pitches E– $F\sharp$ – $A\sharp$ . And just as the opening bar concealed a motion from  $B^7$  to E–B fifths, so this new version moves from  $F\sharp^7$  to B– $F\sharp$  fifths.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, these new fifths in bar 6 hover above a G– $C\sharp$  tritone (tritone drives in  $A^7$  and  $E\flat^7$ ?), which discharges into D and  $G\sharp^{\flat 5}$  (the originally weak tritone drives [1 and 2] are fleshed out into the fuller French-sixth configuration of drives 3 and 4). The  $D^7$  element discharges to a  $G^7$ 's tritone B–F, which, in turn, brings us back to the  $C^7$ – $F\sharp^7$  of drives 3 and 4 through its own discharge. It seems that each of these important drives, however 'polytonally' conflicted, appears to follow its potential discharges through buried circles of fifths. Like the motion from human drive into desire, these spatially ambiguous tonal impulses are drawn into a fully orientated temporal dialogue.

Of drives 3 and 4, however, it is the modified  $C^7$  that comes to the fore in *Caresse dansée*. Indeed, it is  $C^7$  (with  $\sharp 5$  rather than  $\flat 5$ ) that initiates the closing circle of fifths, which runs from  $C^7+$  to  $D\flat^7$  (bars 33–41, repeated and expanded from bars 41–46; see Ex. 6). This cycle disengages and fragments via a tritone 'switch' to  $G^{\sharp 5}$  which leads to a close on C (Ex. 7). Although this fifth-based tonal current cuts cleanly through the close of *Caresse dansée*, its source can be traced back to *Désir*, which ends with a sumptuous chord containing drives parallel to those of its beginning. Skryabin provides the illusion of a perfect cadence (the bass moves from G to C in bars 13–14) but preserves the drive on G – with the augmented fifth,  $D\sharp$ , rather than the diminished fifth, in the resultant chord. This  $D\sharp$  creates an additional level of tritone pliability, sounding against the A which finds its way into the harmony. The pitch F is also present, leading A and  $D\sharp$  (acting as enharmonic  $E\flat$ ) to pull towards a potential  $B\flat$  chord. Yet the pitch B also resonates with A and  $D\sharp$ , producing a parallel  $V^{\flat 7}$  drive to E. Thus at least three

Ex. 6 Skryabin, *Caresse dansée*, bars 41–46

C<sup>7</sup>      F<sup>7</sup>      B<sup>b7</sup>      E<sup>b7</sup>      A<sup>b7</sup>      D<sup>b7</sup>

Ex. 7 Skryabin, *Caresse dansée*, bars 55–59

Fig. 3 Skryabin, *Désir*: comparison of drives in the first and last chords

bar 1	X				X	X				X			
bar 14		X				X	X					O	
	F <sup>#7</sup>	B <sup>7</sup>	E <sup>7</sup>	A <sup>7</sup>	D <sup>7</sup>	G <sup>7</sup>	C <sup>7</sup>	F <sup>7</sup>	B <sup>b7</sup>	E <sup>b7</sup>	A <sup>b7</sup>	D <sup>b7</sup>	G <sup>b7</sup>

dominant drives, on B, G and F, are presented. While this sonority has a different configuration of pitches to that in the original, it rotates each drive a single notch around the circle of fifths. This is more visible in Fig. 3, where ‘X’ shows the drives presented. The ‘O’ designates the only omitted drive – D<sup>b</sup>. Interestingly, the A<sup>b</sup> drive from the opening, which notably remains unsatisfied in this final chord, has just been directed in bar 12 through a sequence leading to an ineluctable perfect cadence from D<sup>b</sup> to G<sup>b</sup> – the only ‘trouble-free’ tonic in the piece. *Désir*’s course through the circle of fifths is frequently overwhelmed by interruptions and diversions, and this cadence on G<sup>b</sup> as the piece draws to its conclusion offers only a fleeting glimpse of stability. In turn, G<sup>b</sup>’s tritonally related C hardly constitutes a satisfactory climax, obscured as it is by non-chordal pitches. But where such progressions are intimated vaguely in *Désir* as potential, through allusion and suggestion rather than fulfilment and confirmation, they achieve their fullest expression in the cadentially assured close of *Caresse dansée* (Exs 6 and 7), which draws the loose and fragmentary drives towards their object of desire.

Ex. 8 Skryabin, *Caresse dansée*, bars 11–16

Ex. 9 Skryabin, *Caresse dansée*, bars 29–33

But in what ways can this final circle of fifths in *Caresse dansée* truthfully be regarded as object orientated? Indeed, its cyclical nature could well embody the circularity of the Lacanian drive, whose true goal is the perpetual orbit. Such a cycle could be coordinated by a fixed tonal object only if this object had already been established as an anchoring point; this could then reasonably allow us to feel the powerful fifthwards motion teleologically. Thus, for C major to be the object of desire, it must have been established beforehand – and this is precisely the ploy executed throughout both pieces. In *Désir*, the most obvious consolidation of C as the tonic breaks through in the final cadence, notwithstanding the compromised form of tonal discharge. In *Caresse dansée*, for all its livelier (and perhaps more wayward) harmonic motion, several instances present pseudo-cadences to a C major triad that both gently arrest tonal motion and earmark this key as something special. First, in bar 8 we may well hear the upper Es (articulated immediately after the  $D^7 \rightarrow G^7$  progression in bars 7–8) as a ‘hint’ towards a C major discharge. Second, in bars 15–16, the cadence that later finishes the movement is tentatively foreshadowed to close on C. Ex. 8 shows us the same pseudo-Neapolitan  $D^b \rightarrow G^7$  progression, with a brief motion to C, though this feminine cadence is quickly swept aside in the subsequent bar. Third, even though the discharge motion from  $G^7$  to C in bars 30–31 (Ex. 9) may be weakened by the retained F above, bar 32 – even if only for the briefest moment – posits a pure C triad.

The compound force of these three fleeting instances, which offer tantalising glimpses of this evanescent sonority without fully laying it out for any sustained period, posits C major as a governing tonic. Of course, as Baker observed in his

brief catalogue of Skryabinesque style traits, 'Scriabin usually avoids stating the full triad at the beginning of a composition. However, the tonic root is frequently found at the beginning, but as the bass of a dissonant chord' (Baker 1980, p. 2). The C in the opening bass, which underpinned the ambiguous chord as a  $V^7$  in F major (as altered dominant seventh on C), doubtless indicated that C major, of all the keys expected, would be the least likely – the one that was posited as a dominant drive away from itself. Yet, as we have seen, through the motion from drive to desire, the free-floating (and free-forming) mass of drives begins to coordinate itself towards a tonic that is for the most part withheld. This allows the extended circle of fifths, when it arrives, to work towards a teleologically driven object. The fact that this object of C was indicated initially in both pieces as a form of lack (a dominant seventh *on* C) which led us away from itself (indicating F major) could well exemplify something of the Lacanian notion of the drive that, even after its articulation through desire, seeks its own return.

### 'A Science of Tonal Love'?

What is one to make of this formal manoeuvre from an amorphous musical mass of free-forming drives towards a clearly phrased dance-movement with its circle of fifths and perfect cadencing? In his own critical writings, Skryabin proposed an evolutionary flow from base drives towards sophisticated embraces: '[a]nimal motions ... change into caresses' (Bowers 1996, vol. 2, p. 245). Conceived in terms of a development towards higher forms of human sexual activity, Skryabin's evolutionary model exactly matches Georges Bataille's suggested evolution from the sexuality of animals to the eroticism of humankind.<sup>36</sup> I argue that similar psychological and evolutionary narratives are at work within the musical structure of *Désir* and *Caresse dansée*, as reflected in their titles. This excursion through the Op. 57 miniatures has outlined ways in which a particular narrative trajectory can be harmonically embodied, by taking into account the various dominant tensions which coalesce. Pieces such as these employ distinct formations of dominant seventh harmony, which blossom as the music unfolds, charting a course of drive to desire. But in Skryabin's later pieces, drive activity overloads the selection process of desire; in fact, the tonic is sometimes used to end a work as an almost arbitrary mechanism for curtailing drive tension, often without a carefully unfolded process. Among the most extreme instances is the luminescent F# major chord which concludes *Prometheus*, Op. 60. This grandiose apotheosis is a 'false' ending that cannot satisfy the drives which rage beneath the surface. Examining the approach to this chord, Harrison demonstrates that 'the ending gains tonic function by means of its structural position alone ... the almost Pavlovian association of the tonic and compositional conclusion' gets the better of us (Harrison 1994, pp. 78–9). In short, the ultimate chord is arbitrary – a Lacanian misinterpretation of the drive energy which called it into being. In Skryabin's later pieces, such false endings, associated with desire for specific tonic chords, were reserved for his large-scale public works – blockbusters such

as *The Poem of Ecstasy* and *Prometheus* – rather than his more private piano miniatures. Some of these miniatures do more justice to drives, refusing to allow the filtering process of desire to shape them. The more intimate pieces of Skryabin's late style – such as the aforementioned Op. 71 No. 2 – do not show obligation to reach out of the drive economy into the elusive structures of desire, but are content to nurture highly local discharges which move in and out of phase with each other, but which ultimately remain nestled within thick chord complexes. In the case of Op. 71, the rigid  $T_3$  and  $T_6$  transposition design precludes any escape into a circle of fifths, and the discharging drives remain locked into their own self-contained network, the final sonority of the work exhibiting the same drives with which the piece began.

The music critic Leonid Sabaneyev, Skryabin's biographer and lifelong friend, offers a poignant testimony: 'Skryabin was a true poet of tonal erotic caresses and he can torture and sting and torment and fondle and tenderly lull with pungent sonorities; there is a whole "science of tonal love" in his compositions. This eroticism is his most delicate and unseizable trait' (Sabaneyev 1975, p. 61). Whilst Skryabin's 'science' may not be as romantic as love, Sabaneyev certainly makes room for love's erotic strain, into which Skryabin draws us through his musical discourse of the more fundamental forces of desire and drive. And in taking Spinoza's catchphrase – 'desire is the essence of man' (Lacan [1964] 1998, p. 275) – as his starting point, Lacan attempted to turn desire into a science which, to a large extent, embraced every level of human experience. It seems pointedly logical, then, that desire and its associated drives can be found and analysed in music which (as with any domain of human experience) engages us in tense patterns of arousal and fulfilment (or deferral) as we come to expect and desire musical objects such as chords or pitches. And Lacanian theory attempts to penetrate deeper into the sub-structures of the free-flowing fluctuations of illusory desire and into the mechanisms of the drive, which must also pertain to our fundamental relations with music. Of course, this study has focussed only on the field of harmony, and we could doubtless gain by exploring alternative terrain. But such an analytical approach suggests that a theory of drives could be extended to certain types of music from the twentieth century without recourse to an extramusical programme; it is possible to mediate between psychoanalysis and musicology directly. A further benefit of this approach is that it closely charts many possible mechanisms of hearing a passage without seizing on just one particular route through a sound pattern and proclaiming it as gospel. The true gift of twentieth-century music is ambiguity, which analysts try desperately to suppress. Rather than turn the many faces of an analysis inwards and fasten them tightly to a single interpretation, an analysis of the ambiguous and conflicting drives within a particular sonority more accurately reveals numerous simultaneously coexisting potentialities. And, in addition to analysing Skryabin's music on the basis of his realised musical procedures – procedures which retrospectively validate analyses of implications – this type of 'drive analysis' attempts to chart the many harmonic potentials

offered at any given moment. Although many of the implications contained in his chord complexes are not realised, they proliferated nonetheless, just as surely as the drives that perpetually seek – often in vain – to motivate the human subject.

## NOTES

All examples are taken from Edition Peters, Plate Nos 12359 and 12422.

1. Skryabin, in Bowers (1974), p. 117.
2. See Taruskin (1997).
3. See especially Poizat (1992), who offers a Lacanian theory of the operatic voice, and Žižek and Dolar (2002), who afford Lacanian insights into the staging and history of opera; the final chapter of Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies* (1997) reads Robert Schumann as a 'Romantic Anti-Humanist' and provides Lacanian interpretations of his Lieder and piano works.
4. As explored by Greenberg and Safran (1987), pp. 16–18. More refined models of the ways in which drive theory impacts emotional response are discussed in Breger (1974), pp. 26–28; the author posits 'instinctual areas' (instinct is often synonymous with drive in this context) which form different emotional patterns.
5. Freud's first serious recognition in Russia came from Nikolai Osipov, a physician who wrote the first exposé of Freud's work in 1908. But Freud was certainly read before this. His *Interpretation of Dreams* was translated as early as 1904. By 1909, Osipov and his colleague N. A. Vryubov were working on a new journal, *Psychotherapy*, and had set to work publishing a Russian 'psychotherapeutic library' containing up-to-date translations of Freud, including translations of his *Lectures* and *Three Essays on Sexuality*. Through the labours of these men, Russian became the first language into which Freud's collected works were translated. Russians such as Leonid Drosnes, Sabina Spelrein, B. Wolff and Tatiana Rosenthal were known to have attended Freud's psychological meetings at his home in Vienna. By 1910 a group had been begun which was explicitly modelled on Freud's Viennese circle; see Miller (1998), pp. 24–34.
6. Gupta shows that Freud, while ignorant of Schopenhauer's ideas at first, eventually found similarities between *The World as Will and Idea* and his own drive theory; Gupta (1975), pp. 185–6.
7. For a recent exploration of Wagner's absorption of Schopenhauer's proto-Freudian aesthetics, see Karnes's analysis of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in terms of Wagner's and Schopenhauer's theories of creativity and the apparatus of dreaming in relation to 'reality'; Karnes (2009). Although the link is not made explicitly in Karnes's article, these theories are highly redolent of Freudian analysis of the *Traumwerk*.
8. In the Russian language, the words 'desire' and 'wish' are identical – *zhelanye* – although these would hold different meanings in Lacanian theory. It has not yet been possible to ascertain which word Skryabin uses in each of Bowers's translations, but Skryabin certainly uses *zhelanye* in his wider writings. See Morris (1999), p. 224 n. 72.

9. See Lacan ([1964] 1998), p. 168.
10. See Bowers (1996), vol. 2, pp. 60–8.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 131–5.
12. The translation is provided by Faubion Bowers in the 1995 Dover reprint edition of the full score of *The Poem of Ecstasy* and *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*.
13. See Deleuze and Guattari (1988), pp. 1–57.
14. See Kramer (1990), pp. 135–75.
15. For Lacan, ‘the object of desire, in the usual sense, is ... a phantasy that is in reality the *support* of desire, or a lure’; Lacan ([1964] 1998), p. 186.
16. See particularly Hepokoski (2002).
17. See Khannanov (2003), p. 130.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 181. A musical application of the Lacanian drive was made by Cumming (1997), who compares it to the rhythm of Steve Reich’s *Different Trains*.
19. Using gestalt psychology as his basis, Meyer (1973) formulated various implication-realisation models. His theories, like Schenker’s, are founded on the premise that unstable (i.e. dissonant) tones have an innate pull towards a point of harmonic stability.
20. In *Drives and Their Vicissitudes* (1915), Freud asked, ‘Are we to suppose that the different instincts which originate in the body and operate on the mind are also distinguished by different qualities, and that that is why they behave in qualitatively different ways in mental life? This supposition does not seem to be justified; we are much more likely to find the simpler assumption sufficient – that the instincts are all qualitatively alike and owe the effect they make only to the amount of excitation they carry, or perhaps, in addition, to certain functions of that quantity’; Freud (1957), vol. 23, p. 123.
21. Szymanowski was certainly influenced by Skryabin, particularly his early works. See Downes’s comment that ‘Szymanowski used to pore over the details of the piano writing in Scriabin’s early piano works and the similarities between the two composers extend to large-scale structural issues which reflect important heroic-mythological topics’; Downes (2003), p. 23. Samson (1980) further discusses the Podhalean mode in relation to Szymanowski’s *Stabat Mater*. Interestingly enough, Tarasti (1979) compares late Szymanowski to late Skryabin, citing the second movement of *Mythes*. Downes (1996) also discusses this piece’s relationship with psychoanalysis – its title being *Narcissus*. The piece does in fact open with a reordered mystic chord that outlines the pitches A, B, D#, G, C# and F#, although Downes explores the possibility of hearing individual ‘elements’ of this chord, apropos of my own discussion.
22. See Harrison (1994).
23. See, for instance, Perle (1984).
24. This is an interpretation held by Piston (1970) and Goldman (1965), as discussed in Nattiez (1985), pp. 107–18.

25. One slight confusion here is Kramer's misrepresentation of the nature of desire. Although speaking of desire, he quotes Freud's *Three Essays in Sexuality* (1905), which pertain to the sexual drive; see Kramer (1990), pp. 135–75.
26. See Taruskin (1988), pp. 149 and 157.
27. See Kaminsky (2004), p. 238.
28. Berger subsumed the two triads within the octatonic collection III; see Berger (1968).
29. That said, polytonality is considered a rather base form of composition. Daniel Harrison cites Pieter van den Toorn, who calls it one of the 'horrors of the musical imagination'; Harrison (1997), p. 393. Harrison himself declares that bitonality has lost its cachet through its use as a 'cheap parlour trick': '[w]rite some ditty in one key, write the accompaniment in another, and *voilà* – something that sounds as "bad" as the most studiously atonal utterance of a real, hard working composer'; Harrison (1997), pp. 393–4.
30. See Dernova (1968).
31. See Harrison (1994).
32. I interpret the melodic E<sub>b</sub> as an accented appoggiatura to E<sub>♯</sub>; likewise, as a chromatic passing note in bar 3. Owing to the changeable nature of the key relationships, chords are denoted absolutely (i.e. D<sup>7</sup>), rather than relative to an anchoring tonic (i.e. V<sup>7</sup> in G). These labels also cover variants of the dominant seventh chord.
33. Such conventionality is a frequently discussed topic and is of particular concern in Baker (1986). A thorough discussion of similar repetition and phrasing techniques in relation to Russian musical style can be found in Taruskin (1988).
34. It seems that from Skryabin's earliest days he conceived miniatures within an opus to be related, particularly by key. See Yanovitsky (2002).
35. In fact the process continues in bars 6–7, which sketch an E<sup>7</sup> → A discharge in a similar manner.
36. See Bataille (2001), p. 29.

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## ABSTRACT

Leonid Sabaneyev attested that Skryabin's compositions contained within them 'a science of tonal love', and Skryabin himself described his two Op. 57 pieces – *Désir* and *Cresse dansée* – as 'new ways of making love'. But what makes this music so erotic in nature? The composer theorised about the nature of desire and sexuality in his writings, but this discussion rarely spills over into analysis of his compositional system. Given that Skryabin was so steeped in psychology throughout his life, I appeal to the work of Freud and Jacques Lacan, and

particularly to their distinction between drive and desire (essentially, the fundamental instinct of the id versus its imaginary representation), a distinction found in Skryabin's own philosophical writings. But the progression between these two states bears comparison with both his philosophy and his harmonic processes, and I thus focus on the function of the dominant chord, exploring ways in which it can replicate the structures of drive and desire. In so doing, I scrutinise several piano miniatures to show that part of Skryabin's method of embodying drive in music lays out ambiguous chord structures which bear simultaneous tendencies to move in a number of different directions, as multivalent as the drive in the human subject. Further, I attempt to show that, out of mystical sonorities, Skryabin temporally unfolds a dialogue of different dominant 'drives', and eventually selects and nurtures a single one at the expense of others, a motion equivalent to desire.