

Aleksandr Nikolayevich Scriabin (1871–1915) — Sonata No. 9, Op. 68, “Black Mass” (1913)

I — Moderato quasi andante, Molto meno vivo, Allegro, Più vivo, Allegro molto, Alla Marcia, Più vivo, Allegro, Più vivo, Presto, Tempo I

Composed as a single movement, Scriabin’s penultimate sonata is one of the most mysterious of all of Scriabin’s late compositions. Born into the Russian romantic piano tradition, Scriabin’s early compositions are understandably influenced by the style of 19th-century romanticism, namely that of Chopin. The first of his piano sonatas are already markedly individual in style compared to his very earliest miniature pieces. However, by the time of his Fifth Sonata (1907), Scriabin’s compositional style was becoming more progressive and gradually closer to the atonal revolutions taking place in Central and Western Europe.

More economical in form than the eighth sonata, in terms of texture and length, the ninth sonata is formed practically out of only three themes which are gradually transformed throughout the sonata. The first theme is presented at the onset, an ominous four-note motif which passes between the hands, this builds in intensity until a climax and presentation of the second theme, a short motif of repeated notes. The third theme is more atmospheric in character in this instance, and consists of a gradually rising melody.

As once boldly described by music writer, David Dubal, ‘the sulphurous smell of evil reeks in every measure’, this sonata is as close to a nightmare as piano music has perhaps ever achieved, because of this, the ninth sonata has achieved notoriety due to its associations with the devil and the occult. Scriabin was once asked to compare the evilness of the Ninth Sonata, to the *Poème satanique*, Op. 36. He said, ‘In the ninth sonata I came into contact with the Satanic more profoundly than ever before. There [in Op. 36] Satan is *a guest*; here he is *at home*.’ Scriabin once also remarked that felt as though he was ‘practising sorcery’, rather than ‘playing’ this sonata.

Scriabin’s use of highly descriptive markings in French are notable in this sonata. For example, the opening four-note motif is marked *‘Legendaire’* (Legendary); the theme of repeated notes *‘mysterieusement murmuré* (mysteriously murmuring); the third theme *‘avec une lueur naissante’* (with a nascent lueur); most poetically, in a later transformation of this theme *‘avec un douceur de plus en plus caressante et empoisonnée’* (with a sweetness, becoming more and more caressing and poisoned).

The informal title, ‘Black Mass’, was given to this sonata by Scriabin’s friend and theologian, Alexei Podgaetsky, who contrasted the sonata’s demonic qualities with the blinding light of the seventh sonata, subtitled ‘White Mass’. Scriabin was responsible for the subtling of the seventh sonata, but also appreciated the unofficial title of the ninth sonata.