



# **A Scriabin's *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, and *Poème*, Op. 71, No. 2: Variations of Mystic Chord and Proposed Derivation from an Altered Dominant Thirteenth Chord**

***Ampai Buranaprapuk***

*PhD Candidate, College of Music, Mahidol University, Nakhonpathom, Thailand*

***Narongchai Pidokrajt***

*College of Music, Mahidol University, Nakhonpathom, Thailand*

---

## ***Abstract***

The mystic chord is very characteristic in Scriabin's late works, in which he negates functional harmony. However, the sonority is found earlier in his tonal works, implied within the voice-leading as an altered dominant thirteenth chord. In the *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, and *Poème*, Op. 71, No. 2, Scriabin varies the chord by altering one or two pitches similar to the manner in which he alters the enriched dominants of his tonal works. This article demonstrates, through these two piano poems, variations of the mystic chord and proposed derivation from an expanded dominant harmony.

***Key words:*** mystic chord, Scriabin, expanded dominant harmony

---

## **Introduction**

Scriabin's abandonment of tonic endings and goal-directed, formal-functional harmony distinguishes the output of his late years from those pre-dating his encounter with Russian Symbolism. The mystic or "Prometheus" chord becomes prominent. The chord is commonly thought of as deriving from Prometheus (*The Poem of Fire*), Op. 60, where it sounds throughout, chiefly in the guise of stacked fourths. However, this chord was earlier formed in a tonal context as an altered dominant thirteenth chord. In his final Symbolist period, the harmony is used without regard for functionality, transcending, as it were, tradition.

According to Richard Taruskin, Scriabin called the mystic chord "the chord of the pleroma."<sup>1</sup> This was Scriabin's answer to Rachmaninoff, who heard the harmony during a rehearsal of the *Prometheus* and asked about it. The term pleroma came from Greek. It relates to the divinity, something that does not exist in the physical world. Taruskin believes that Scriabin encountered the word in Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) where it is linked to Promethean concepts like "Spiritual Fire" and "Astral Light."<sup>2</sup> Scriabin tended to use the harmony to invoke a time and space beyond the material, phenomenal world. The *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, and *Poème*, Op. 71, No. 2, are examples of Scriabin's late piano works where

the mystic chord is used to this end. In these two short pieces, Scriabin varies the chord in the manner that he alters his expanded dominant harmony in his tonal works. This article demonstrates variations of the mystic chord and proposed derivation from expanded dominant harmonies within the two poems.

## Results and Discussion

### *Poème, Op. 59, No. 1 (1910)*

The *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, was composed in 1910, before Scriabin completed *Prometheus*, which he put aside, according to a peculiar observation by Faubion Bowers, “to autograph a music book.”<sup>3</sup> The result was his *Feuillet d’Album*, Op. 58, and *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1.4

The special sound of *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, derives from the opening measure (see example 4a), itself a variation of material from earlier works. In the *Poème languide* (1905) from *Three Pieces*, Op. 52, Scriabin uses a dominant thirteenth without a fifth and eleventh and with a flattened ninth as a penultimate chord resolving to a tonic at the end. This chord is very endemic to the poem and thus, with reference to the title of the piece, justifies the nickname *languer-chord*.<sup>5</sup> He uses this chord again in *Poème* (1906), Op. 52, No. 1, and marks where the chord appears *avec languer*.<sup>6</sup> In the *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, Scriabin composes something in-between the *languer-chord* and the mystic chord. Example 1 compares the sonority of m. 1 of this poem with the *languer* and mystic chords with B as the bass note.

### Example 1

The gap of a minor seventh in the lower part of the measure 1 chord leaves a space that Scriabin subsequently fills in with a variable note, either a diminished or augmented fifth (regardless of the enharmonic spelling) above the root, which recalls his alteration of the fifth of conventional chords up or down by semitone in earlier works. In m. 7, Scriabin adds a

G#, the result being an augmented fifth above the root C. Example 2 compares the sonority at m. 7 with the mystic chord on C. This same sonority is used again in mm. 9, 19, 21, 24, 27, and 29.7

### Example 2

Scriabin uses an augmented fifth here, while the mystic chord has a diminished fifth (here spelled as a raised fourth from the root). The mystic chord is used in mm. 36-38 (example 3a); it is liquidated in m. 39 (example 3c), the end of the piece, with the same sonority as m. 1.

### Example 3

#### a. Measures 36-38

#### b. Mystic chord on B

c. Measure 39, E# is the omitted note from the preceding mystic chord

The sonority of mm. 36-38 (example 3a) is the same as the mystic chord on B (example 3b). In example 3c, when the variant note (E#) is omitted, not only does it become the main sonority of the piece, it also creates the interval of a perfect fourth when re-ordering the notes in the scalar form that Scriabin uses at the end. The perfect fourth in the last two notes of the top part serves as a quasi-cadential gesture-com-

parable to dominant-tonic motion in tonal music—though, to be sure, the poem avoids traditional tonality.

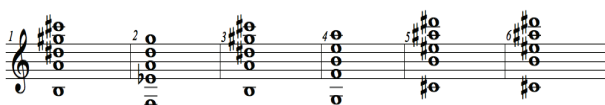
The first few two-bar phrases of the poem feature the same sonority built on different roots. Example 4 shows mm. 1-6 and a quasi-chordal reduction.

**Example 4**

a. Measures 1-6



b. Quasi-chordal reduction of measures 1-6



Measure 10 (example 5), with the C#, comprises the same notes as in a mystic chord constructed on E. However, given the F# in the bass, this measure looks like F#13 with omitted eleventh and flattened thirteenth (example 9b), a version of an altered expanded dominant chord. Scriabin's mystic chord, as found earlier in his tonal music in the form of a dominant thirteenth with flattened fifth, major ninth, and omitted eleventh and functions as a dominant harmony,8 is subject to different, ever-evolving variations within the poem. The voice-leading in measures 10-11 yields a new chord in m. 12 (example 6).

**Example 5 Measures 10-11**



**Example 6 Measure 12**



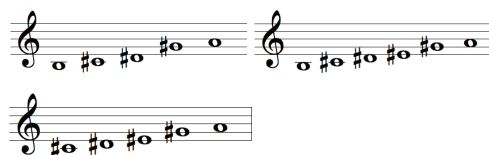
This new chord in m. 12 is heard again in mm. 23, 25, 26, 31, 33, and 34, and comprises an altered version of the governing sonority of this poem. Example 7a compares this new sonority with the measure 1 chord with E# as the root note. While the main chord of the poem often appears with B as the root and the mystic chord here in mm. 36-38 is the one constructed on B, example 7b presents all three sonorities together. The sonorities of measures 1 and 12 are subsets of the mystic chord on B.

**Example 7**

a. Measure 12 sonority and measure 1 sonority on E#



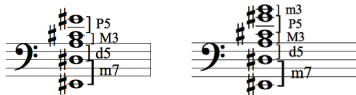
b. Measure 1 sonority on B, mystic chord on B, and measure 12 sonority



There are four inter-related chords in this poem, in mm. 1, 7, 12, and 36, along with subsets of whole-tone scales. Scriabin transposes, varies, and reorders the chords, which differ by one or two pitches from each other. What remains the same is the intervallic structure of the tritone above the minor seventh at the bottom of each chord—which are better analyzed as synthetic chords rather than modal scales. Scriabin always presents them in root position. However, the sonority of mm. 36-38 (with E# in the bass), which shares the notes of the mystic chord constructed on B

as in the most representative form formed out of stacked fourths, is similar to the measure 12 sonority—just only one note is added on the top. Example 8 compares the sonority of measure 12 with the one presented in mm. 36-38. It shows how strictly Scriabin maintains the intervallic structure and position of his chords.

**Example 8 Measure 12 and measures 36-38**



The intervallic structure of the tritone above the minor seventh at the bottom of each chord recalls Scriabin's expanded dominant harmonies in his tonal works; Scriabin often retains this structure. Thus the manner in which the mystic chord is treated in variations in this poem can be likened to the alteration of expanded dominant chords elsewhere.

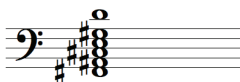
The assumption that Scriabin's mystic chord evolves from an altered expanded dominant harmony has additional justification. The *languueur*-chord, the precursor of the mystic chord, is used with dominant function in the *Poème languide*. Looking back to example 5, mm. 10-11 of the *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, prove to be comprised of notes from a mystic chord built on E but with an F# in the bass it looks like the altered version of a dominant thirteenth chord. This chord is placed near the end of the first section of the poem, creating a sense of closure before the opening material returns in m. 13 (example 9). This passage deviates from what traditionally is in the key of B, and the chord on F# in mm. 10-11 acts like a dominant harmony.

**Example 9**

a. *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, measures 10-13



b. F#13 with omitted eleventh and flattened thirteenth in mm. 10-11



c. Mystic chord on E



This poem is comprised of a series of expanded chords, creating tension that seems to continue without release until the end. The sound recalls that of Prometheus, Op. 60, where mystic chords, redolent of altered expanded dominant harmonies in his tonal music, are heard in sequence until the end, where the music moves to an F# major triad. Such prolonged tension is typical of Scriabin's last period, and in some later works he ends the music with an expanded-dominant-quality chord, suggesting an infinite, never-ending experience.

**Poème, Op. 71, No. 2**

This poem is similar to the *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, in terms of lyricism and harmonic language; both of them also vary the mystic chord. In the *Poème*, Op. 71, No. 2, the variation of the chord in the opening measure suggests the same version as found in mm. 10-11 of the *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1. This altered thirteenth chord can be found in the Fourth Sonata where the chord is still functional but used in a fleeting way as a result of the voice-leading. Example 10 shows this version of dominant thirteenth chord from the Fourth Sonata.

**Example 10**

a. Measures 154-155 from the second movement of the Fourth Sonata



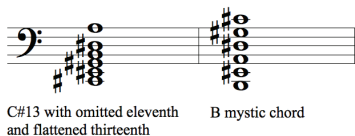
b. Chordal reduction with flattened thirteenths



Here the chord lacks the interval of the eleventh. The lowered thirteenth in m. 154, A□, may be considered a passing note, just like the D□ in m. 155, but the latter is given more emphasis through repetition. When the dominant thirteenth chords are heard

without the interval of the eleventh, and with the thirteenth flattened, they turn into mystic chords. Example 11 compares the altered dominant thirteenth chord in m. 154 of the Sonata with a mystic chord built on B.

**Example 11**



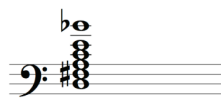
The chords in example 11 share the same notes. It supports the idea that Scriabin’s mystic chord evolves from an expanded and altered dominant harmony. Example 12 shows m. 1 of the *Poème*, Op. 71, No. 2, which is the same version of the altered dominant thirteenth chord found in the Fourth Sonata (shown in example 10). This D13 with omitted eleventh and flattened thirteenth (example 12b) is the same sonority as the mystic chord constructed on C (example 12c).

**Example 12**

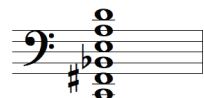
a. *Po\_*me, Op. 71, No. 2, measure 1



b. D13 with omitted eleventh and flattened thirteenth

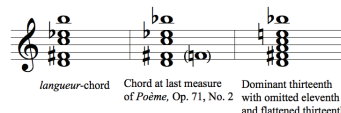


c. Mystic chord on C



The last chord of the poem is the same chord as in the opening measure but now with Eb held through the end without an E, with F on the top as a result of voice-leading, and with A omitted. This chord blends the *languueur*-chord and the version of dominant thirteenth chord found in the Fourth Sonata. Example 13 compares three chords in stacked-third form.

**Example 13**



The thirteenth chord is a type of harmony Scriabin deploys extensively in this poem. He varies it but it still remains a thirteenth chord, which cannot be expanded further. It has the same quality as the ever-expanding seven-pitch mystic chord. Scriabin stretches his harmonies to the limit to reach his transcendent goal.

Both the *Poème*, Op. 59, No. 1, and *Poème*, Op. 71, No. 2, demonstrate the equivalence between the mystic chord and the altered dominant thirteenth chords found in Scriabin’s earlier tonal works. In the two poems, he relies on tritones over minor sevenths in the bottom parts of the mystic chord, as he does in his expanded dominants. These similarities attest to the derivation of the mystic chord from functional sonorities.

**Acknowledgment**

This article is part of my dissertation titled “Connections between Music and Poetry in the Piano Poems of Alexander Scriabin” completed in September 2013 at College of Music, Mahidol University, Thailand; I am grateful to Simon Morrison of Princeton University for his advice on it)

## References

Richard Taruskin. (2005). Extinguishing the 'Petty "I".' (Transcendentalism, I): Scriabin, Messiaen. in *The Oxford History of Western Music 4* (New York: Oxford University Press), 216.

Ibid.

Faubion Bowers. (1995). *Scriabin: A Biography*, 2nd revised ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc.), 2:210.

Ibid.

See Ampai Buranaprapuk. (2013). "Connections between Music and Poetry in the Piano Poems of Alexander Scriabin" (PhD diss., Mahidol University, 2013), 90-91.

The chord, however, for Scriabin seems to evoke languor only in the period of 1905-1907. He uses this harmony again in later years but without any reference to languor.

With transposition in mm. 19, 24, and 27.

Such as in *Poème*, Op. 32, No. 1, and the Fourth Sonata. For more details, see Buranaprapuk, "Connections between Music and Poetry," 45-46.