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Танеев, Скрябин и идеи тематического единства в симфониях русских композиторов конца XIX — начала XX веков¹

Аннотация

Одно из ужасных совпадений в истории музыки состоит в том, что Сергей Иванович Танеев, некоторое время бывший учителем Александра Николаевича Скрябина, умер ровно через два месяца после своего ученика в 1915 году. Через сто лет после смерти этих двух композиторов в статье заново рассматривается их художественная связь на примере двух сочинений, которые разделяют всего несколько лет, а именно: Симфонии Танеева до минор, соч. 12 (1896–1898), и Второй симфонии Скрябина, соч. 29 (1901), написанной в той же тональности. В обеих симфониях используются многочисленные трансформации тем и мотивные связи между частями. В этом отношении данные симфонии связаны с парадигмой многочастной оркестровой композиции XIX века, так называемым «принципом цикличности». В статье также рассматриваются отношения учителя и ученика и возможные взаимовлияния между обоими композиторами.

Ключевые слова

Сергей Танеев, Александр Скрябин, Московская консерватория, симфония, оркестр, образование, композиция, теория музыки, музыкальная форма, циклическая форма, тематическое преобразование, тематизм

Taneyev, Skryabin, and the Orchestra: Concepts of Thematic Unity in Russian Symphonies at the Turn of the 20th Century²

Abstract

It is one of music history's morbid coincidences that Sergey Taneyev, the temporary teacher of Aleksandr Skryabin, died as early as just two months after his former pupil in 1915. In the year of the centennial of both composers' deaths, this paper reconsiders their artistic relationship, focusing on a pair of works that were written within a span of only a few years, namely: Taneyev's C-minor Symphony, Op. 12 (1896–98), and Skryabin's 2nd Symphony in the same key, Op. 29 (1901). Both symphonies employ multiple thematic transformation and motivic cross-references throughout their movements. This aspect links these two symphonies to a nineteenth-century paradigm of multi-movement orchestral composition, the so-called cyclic principle. The paper also examines the teacher-student relation between Taneyev and Skryabin, as well as possible mutual influences between both composers.

Keywords

Sergey Taneyev, Aleksandr Skryabin, Moscow Conservatory, symphony, orchestra, education, composition, music theory, musical form, cyclic form, thematic transformation, thematicism

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It is one of music history's morbid coincidences that Sergey Taneyev, the temporary teacher of Aleksandr Skryabin, died as early as just two months after his former pupil in 1915. In the year of the centennial of both composer's deaths, this paper aims to reconsider their artistic relationship. After a brief discussion of Taneyev's and Skryabin's orchestral oeuvres and their compositional principles, I will focus on a pair of works that were written within a span of only a few years—Taneyev's C-minor Symphony, Op. 12 (1896–98), and Skryabin's 2nd Symphony in the same key, Op. 29 (1901). A comparative analysis of these works uncovers a fascinating connection: Both symphonies employ multiple thematic transformation and motivic cross-references throughout their movements. This aspect link these symphonies to a 19th-century paradigm of multi-movement orchestral composition, the so-called cyclic principle — a concept established primarily by Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, and César Franck. The paper also examines the teacher-student relation between Taneyev and Skryabin, as well as possible mutual influences between the two composers. Finally, I try to determine what aspects of musical craftsmanship Skryabin could have acquired in Taneyev's classes at the Moscow Conservatory.

I. Cyclic Form in European and Russian Orchestral Music

When analysing 19th-century orchestral music, it can be observed that multi-movement compositions typically use formal structures that establish a correlation between their parts. This aesthetic concept is realized by thematic unity or, as it was called by German musicologist Hans Mersmann, «*Substanzgemeinschaft*» of the several movements. The transformation of a motif or theme into another shape or appearance means that it remains identical in structure but differs in character, meter, register, dynamics, instrumentation or other parameters. Thus, thematic transformation or, in recent research, «thematicism» may be considered a principle of variation, applied in order to create a cross-movement coherence of musical material. In the 1880s–90s, a considerable part of European symphonies were written using cyclic techniques of this kind. The first scholar to reflect the concept theoretically was the French composer and theorist Vincent d'Indy. He defined the category of the «*sonate cyclique*» in his *Cours de composition musicale* (1909). The defining quality of a cyclic sonata form, according to d'Indy, is that motifs and themes are continuously quoted and transformed throughout a multi-movement work [8, 375]. D'Indy frequently refers to the music of César Franck, his teacher, whose late compositions are most characteristic of this description of cyclic form.

Looking back to the orchestral music of Ludwig van Beethoven, we find a starting point for the development of multi-movement cyclic form. Both Beethoven's 5th and 6th Symphonies, Opp. 67 and 68, contain quotations and reiterations of their most important themes. Following the *Pastorale* of 1807–08, two other prime examples of cyclic form arise: First, Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, Op. 16 (1830), which we may call the archetype of the Romantic programmatic symphony, with the famous *idée fixe* and its transformations pervading every movement—and second, on the field of chamber music, Franz Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*, D.760 (1822), with its cyclic idea being derived from a song. When Richard Wagner proclaimed the end of the symphony genre in the middle of the 19th century, opposing concepts of musical form emerged, such as the symphonic poem. In the 1850s, the concept of thematic transformation was closely linked to Franz Liszt's single-movement orchestral works and piano concertos. However, during the second half of the 19th century, the traditional four-movement form re-emerges in «the second age of symphony», as Carl Dahlhaus terms it [6, 220].³ Before and after this development, we can identify two «schools» of multi-movement cyclic form, separated by chronology and geography:

³ As a matter of fact, the symphony genre was definitely not dead in the meantime, even if many European composers did not explicitly focus on multi-movement orchestral composition during the 1860s. It might be misleading to only consider works that are frequently played nowadays; many more have been written.

- Germany, during the 1840s–50s: Mendelssohn's *Scottish Symphony*, Op. 56; Schumann's 4th Symphony, Op. 120; then, most remarkable, Liszt's *Faust Symphony* (1854); and also works by Carl Reinecke, Max Bruch, Josef Rheinberger, and Joachim Raff, many of them with a programmatic content.

- France, during the 1880s–90s: Franck's D-minor Symphony (1888) and most of his late chamber music; Saint-Saëns's 3rd Symphony with organ, Op. 78; d'Indy's *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard*, Op. 25, and 2nd Symphony, op. 57; the symphonies by Ernest Chausson (Op. 20) and Paul Dukas (1896); and also Claude Debussy's early string quartet, which has a distinctive cyclic quality.

Multi-movement cyclic form is also found in the music of mid-19th-century Russia. While Anton Rubinstein did not employ thematic unity in his six symphonies, the concept seems to have resonated with composers of the «Mighty Handful». Drawing on Liszt's achievements, Mily Balakirev and Aleksandr Borodin employ thematic transformation within the individual movements of their symphonies, while obvious cross-movement references are rare. Borodin's 1st Symphony in E-flat major (1867) is a prominent exception, with a falling fourth being a crucial interval in every movement's main theme. Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite *Antar*, op. 9 (1868), is based on elaborated transformation of a mono-thematic subject. Likewise, in some of his later works, such as the single-movement Piano Concerto in C-sharp minor, op. 30 (1882–83), cyclic techniques become more readily apparent. Rimsky-Korsakov's compositions may have served as a model for his pupil Aleksandr Glazunov, who regularly employs thematic transformation in his symphonies of the 1890s.

A number of works by Pyotr Tchaikovsky can also be associated with this development of symphonic form. In particular, thematic unity is found in his 4th Symphony in F minor, Op. 36 (1877) and in the 5th Symphony in E minor, Op. 64 (1888). The latter is frequently regarded as a paradigm of cyclic form within Russian orchestral music: The remarkable opening of the first movement's introduction, played by the clarinet in its lowest register, is quoted within the internal movements and eventually returns as the finale's main theme, now played by the strings and transformed into a glorious E major. When looking at Taneyev's and Skryabin's contributions, we must consider them in a direct lineage to Tchaikovsky, who was Taneyev's teacher. Taneyev's and Skryabin's works are embedded in a tradition of formal craftsmanship, passed on from teacher to student. Therefore, the personal and artistic relationship of these two is worth a more detailed observation.

II. Two C-minor Symphonies from Moscow

Neither Taneyev nor Skryabin were as focused on writing symphonies as Tchaikovsky or Glazunov. Taneyev was concentrated on chamber and vocal music, while Skryabin, who popularly emerged as a composer-pianist, was even condemned at one point by Leonid Sabaneyev as a «pseudo-symphonist» [12, 163ff.] lacking intuition for orchestral writing.⁴ Furthermore, neither of the two composers took a straightforward approach to the genre. Since the 1870s, the young Taneyev made several attempts at writing a symphony, but failed to complete a work that met his own aesthetic demands. His first three symphonies remained unprinted during his lifetime; only the 3rd was premiered in 1884. Consequently, the four-movement C-minor Symphony, Op. 12, completed in 1898, is in fact Taneyev's fourth. It is also his first contribution in the symphonic literature to be met with critical and popular acclaim. The symphony bears a dedication to Glazunov; it was first performed in March 1898 in St Petersburg and subsequently printed in 1901 by Mitrofan Belyayev's publishing house.

Skryabin did not devote himself to orchestral composition before 1896. Belyayev, who also was Skryabin's publisher and mentor, had harshly criticized the young composer for

⁴ For further instances of Sabaneyev's contemptuous judgment of Skryabin's talent as an orchestral composer, attesting him a lack of symphonic style and technique, see *ibid.* [12, 166].

his 1st Symphony in E major, Op. 26 (1899–1900). The work has no less than six movements and, in succession of Beethoven's Ninth, incorporates an extensive choral finale on the composer's own lyrics. In Belyayev's opinion, the young composer was already getting ahead of himself. Due to this objection, Skryabin abandoned his plan to include voices in his next symphony [7, 50]. The resulting work, the 2nd Symphony, Op. 29, was written in 1901 and premiered in January 1902 in St Petersburg under Anatoly Lyadov's direction. It shares its key with Taneyev's symphony, and it was also published by Belyayev in 1903. We have evidence of Taneyev's reaction to the symphony: after attending a rehearsal, he remarked in his diary:

«It is composed more freely than his first; but there are passages of poor melodic content. I like the free approach to musical form—the first movement is sort of an introduction..., so that the second appears as the actual first. Due to deficiencies in instrumentation, certain things merge in the musical form that were meant to be separated; moreover, the excessive use of the brass is disturbing» [2, 22].⁵

Skryabin never referred to a traditional four-movement structure when writing symphonies—his 3rd, the *Divine Poem*, Op. 43, has only three movements, while the later symphonic poems are single-movement works. Despite this fact, the 2nd Symphony might be considered his most conventional in terms of musical form and architecture. It is cast in five movements, with the first serving as an independent slow introduction to a sonata-allegro second movement—just as is the case in the 1st Symphony. In the 2nd Symphony, the sonata-allegro is written in E-flat major, leaving the introduction as the only movement in the key of C minor.

Vincent d'Indy determines that there are three constitutive elements of variation in cyclic form: rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic modification of a motif or theme [8, 378f.]. In addition to d'Indy's approach, I will refer in my own analysis to an extended hierarchy of how cyclic multi-movement form can be realised: (1) mere quotation of a phrase, as modelled in the treatment of Berlioz's *idée fixe*; (2) «*Substanzgemeinschaft*» within a movement or in consecutive movements through a common motivic nucleus or transformation of motifs, and (3) transformation of a distinctive thematic structure.

In Taneyev's symphony, a core motif is introduced at the very beginning of the work, with a rising fifth falling to the tritone (*c—g—f-sharp*). These intervals immediately expand to a rising major sixth, falling to the minor sixth (*c—a—a-flat*) [11, 116].⁶ I will refer to this three-note motif as the work's nucleus, functioning in analogy to a similar three-note motif (*d—c-sharp—f*) from César Franck's D-minor symphony. In a review of Taneyev's symphony, Boris Asafiev notices the significance of that phrase for the first movement's thematic process [4, 287]⁷ but without identifying the entry of the main theme (bar 33ff.) as its retrograde inversion. Here, the work's cyclic subject appears in full dimension and forms a distinctive seven-bar structure. The subordinate theme in A-flat major, starting with a downward scale and an ascending fifth, is a contrast in character and material. It leads to a closing section in A-flat minor that stretches the intervals of the nucleus to falling fifths, minor sixths and diminished sevenths (bar 95ff.: *f-flat—a-flat—g—f-flat*; bar 139ff.: *e-flat—a-flat—f-flat—g—d-flat*). The internal thematic relations can thus be considered a «*Substanzgemeinschaft*» of the second type, forming a polyphonic network of voices and subject entries within the exposition, leading to thematicism of even higher density during the development section.

⁵ This diary entry of March 20, 1903, is quoted in Wehrmeyer [14, 180] and provided here in my own translation (W. B.). The Moscow premiere of the symphony took place on April 3, 1903, conducted by Vasily Safonov.

⁶ In Taneyev's thematic invention, the upper tritone to the tonic can be identified as a generally significant interval, as well as dissonant leaps of diminished sevenths and minor ninths.

⁷ Another early review by Nikolay Kashkin, printed in the journal *Moskovskie vedomosti* in 1902 and quoted by Yakovlev [15, 56f.], appreciates the close connection of the work's individual movements but does not refer to thematic transformation in detail.

Alternatively, Skryabin distributes his main material over two separate movements. The introductory first movement immediately states the work's cyclic subject, based on a falling major sixth and an ascending triad (*c—e-flat—g—c—b-flat*). It is played by a solo clarinet in its lowest register, strongly reminiscent of the beginning of Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony. Over the course of the movement, the subject is treated canonically, with the voices' entrances following a pattern of ascending thirds. Skryabin's second movement, the symphony's actual sonata-allegro, introduces a contrasting subject in 6/8 time signature, with a thematic contour that is quite common in Skryabin's music—Swiss musicologist Sigfried Schibli refers to it as an «*Aufflug-Thema*» («upflying theme») [13, 247]. In its continuation, the trombones enter with the cyclic subject's head motif, the falling sixth being stretched to a seventh (bar 17ff.: *c—d—e-flat—g—c-flat*). In drawing a comparison to Taneyev, we can name this group of notes a nucleus. As the exposition continues, it reappears a few times in the bass voice, accompanying the secondary theme. In the closing section, it is the trombones again that present another variant of the nucleus at a *fortissimo* dynamic (bar 106ff.: *b-flat—c-sharp—d—g-flat*) [7, 55f.]. The modifications applied to this phrase can also be regarded as transformations of the second type.

When we consider how the last movements of Taneyev's and Skryabin's symphonies refer back to their first movements, the composers establish a connection of the third type: a full thematic transformation of their respective cyclic subjects. In Taneyev's, the theme remains very close to its original character, changing the 3/4 time to *alla breve* [4, 289] and adjusting the note values and metric outline (see example 1).⁸ In Skryabin's, after the first movement had served as an introduction to the second, a similar relation applies to the fourth and fifth movements, which are likewise connected through an *attacca* transition. Skryabin chooses the parallel key of C major for the triumphant entry of his sonata-rondo finale.⁹ Thus, he significantly changes the cyclic subject's character, even while retaining the same contour and note durations (see example 2).

Example 1. Taneyev, Symphony in C minor, Op. 12: beginnings of the 1st and 4th movement



Example 2. Skryabin, 2nd Symphony in C minor, Op. 29: beginnings of the 1st and 5th movements



In Taneyev's symphony, the finale's subordinate theme further refers to the nucleus and its variants in its leaps of diminished sevenths. The movement's coda enters with a transformation of the first movement's subordinate theme, in a hymnic C major, and is realised in

⁸ Due to the change to binary meter, Asafiev observes the decisive character of the finale's beginning, compared to the elasticity of the cyclic subject's original appearance.

⁹ Eberle [7, 54] labels the cyclic subject a «*Leitthema*», transforming from the sombre clarinet solo of the 1st movement to the final tutti apotheosis. Schibli [13, 214] further comments on this development.

a two-part canon. This passage eventually integrates the second movement's main theme with the nucleus, forming a three-fold contrapuntal juxtaposition of utmost mastery. Whereas Taneyev's finale incorporates every significant theme in dense thematic construction, Skryabin's finale is somewhat less impressive. His cyclic subject is frequently referenced throughout the symphony; it appears three times in the finale in its unaltered form, impressively providing a sense of overarching coherence.

With respect to the thematic transformation, we can now state that Taneyev's dense structures are clearly derived from compositional techniques of Beethoven and Brahms, as ideas are constantly developed out of preceding ones. By contrast, Skryabin's sequential technique of motivic continuation seems to stem from Liszt's music: occasionally, it also resembles the binary structures of Wagner's early aria forms. As a result, Taneyev's and Skryabin's symphonies are both indebted to the preceding generation of 19th-century composers. This heritage reveals itself mainly in terms of cyclic form and macroscopic structure, while thematic processes on a motivic level differ between the two composers.

III. Discipleship, Influences and Assessments

Taneyev, a key figure in Russian music from the mid-1870s on, studied piano with Nikolay Rubinstein and composition with Pyotr Tchaikovsky, whose classes in harmony and instrumentation he also attended. Taneyev's relationship to Tchaikovsky is of particular interest: he developed from a student to the foremost consultant of his former teacher on matters of orchestral composition. Tchaikovsky highly esteemed Taneyev's opinion of his music, despite Taneyev's sometimes blunt or even rude assessments. Although he sometimes disapproved of his mentor's symphonic works [14, 151*f.*], Taneyev arranged Tchaikovsky's 4th and 5th symphonies for piano four hands.¹⁰ Both of these works employ thematic unity to a certain extent. Taneyev, one of the first graduates of the Moscow Conservatory, succeeded his famous teacher's position, as he was appointed professor in 1878. Additionally, he took over Rubinstein's piano class in 1881, and also served as the institution's director in 1885–89.

The influence of Taneyev's music and teaching on Skryabin has not yet been discussed in detail. Skryabin's instruction began informally: in 1884, Taneyev began teaching the twelve-year-old in private lessons. When Skryabin was enrolled at the Conservatory in 1888, he was accepted to Taneyev's counterpoint class. However, since he was primarily interested in developing as a pianist, he tended to neglect theoretical subjects. After he quit studying with Taneyev in late 1890, he attended Anton Arensky's class in free composition for several months—but there was so much animosity between them that Skryabin had to leave the Conservatory in 1892 without a degree in composition. It is not clearly known why Skryabin left Taneyev's classes. Nevertheless, we can presume that he still was indebted to Taneyev's teaching after the completion of his studies, after making the acquaintance of Belyayev in 1894, and still at the time he composed his 2nd Symphony. Surely, Taneyev did not relate to Skryabin's aesthetic and stylistic turn around the year 1905, as hardly anyone in Moscow did, so it is understandable that scholars have noted his shift away from Taneyev's influence [5, 245]. In 1925, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Lenin's official in cultural affairs, stated Taneyev to be an «architect» and Skryabin an «individualist» [10, 35–37]. This polarising judgment might have also contributed to the prevalent opinion that the two composers do not have much in common, either in style or personal history.

The idea that certain traits of Skryabin's style are rooted in Taneyev's teaching is also problematic. Musicologists widely argue that polyphonic textures, wherever arising in the music of Taneyev's pupils, can be traced to his doctrine of counterpoint. This is an impulsive conclusion, since it neglects the fact that Skryabin's piano writing, just like Rachmaninov's

¹⁰ Wehrmeyer quotes Ernst Kuhn's translation of a letter from Taneyev to Tchaikovsky of March 18, 1878, addressing Tchaikovsky with a severe, yet nuanced critique of his 4th Symphony.

or Medtner's, contains distinct contrapuntal features. However, the development of Skryabin's polyphonic writing is still traceable to Taneyev, even beyond the lessons at the Conservatory. Taneyev gave his treatise *The Convertible Counterpoint in the Strict Style* to his former student as a gift, and Skryabin kept it in his personal library. The book was published in 1909; however, considering that Taneyev had worked on it for twenty years, he might well have acquainted his students with his developing theories beforehand. Skryabin himself occasionally referred to his thematic invention as «in the strict style», and thus, we may conclude that he was influenced by his teacher not only in contrapuntal writing but also in the coherence of his themes and musical forms.¹¹ A lesser-known fact is that Taneyev, who is chiefly renowned as a teacher of counterpoint, also developed a new curriculum for the Conservatory's class of musical form.¹² He taught this class from 1897–1905, the year he retired from the institution.

At this point, we can reassess Lunacharsky's evaluation of Taneyev and Skryabin. In Lunacharsky's words, the «architect» Taneyev is rooted in philosophical thought on music, designing his artworks with intellectual control; the «individualist» Skryabin, on the contrary, tends towards a passionate expression of his artistic ideas, seeing himself as a mystic conjurer. This antithetic view, articulated by a Communist intellectual in contention with monarchism, is perhaps not an appropriate evaluation. Only a few years after the Russian revolution, Lunacharsky implicitly blames Taneyev for being a «formalist» and a «monarchist»—just like his direct contemporary, Vincent d'Indy [10: 33, 39]. For ideological reasons, Lunacharsky does not elaborate on the biographical and aesthetic parallels between Taneyev and d'Indy, when a comparison of these two could have benefited his argument. Both musicians represented traditionalism, academism and a strong affinity to counterpoint. Both, as composers, relied on classical forms and genres. Both were immensely influential as teachers and authors of textbooks; and both founded their own private schools after resigning from their conservatories.

Boleslav Yavorsky reports that Taneyev called Skryabin «his real pupil» only a few days before his death [9, 198].¹³ Let us not overestimate the fact that he outlived his student for only a few weeks. But, bearing in mind that he constantly observed Skryabin's symphonic output with good favour, I dare call the circumstances of his death a tragic coincidence. Just like Schubert, who took part in Beethoven's funeral ceremony and was buried close to him only a year and a half later, Taneyev did not recover from a pneumonia he caught on Skryabin's funeral—or, at least, this is the narrative that was told. Even if this rumour is incorrect (who can know for certain?), it seems nonetheless to be justified, as it places the two composers in a kind of posthumous alliance that was not always obvious during their lifetime.

¹¹ In Taneyev's title, the attribute *strogy* (strict) implies a reference to Palestrina's contrapuntal writing. However, Lobanova suggests that Skryabin might have interpreted the term differently [9, 194ff.].

¹² Arzamanov gives a comprehensive record of Taneyev's methodology in teaching musical form [1].

¹³ Lobanova quoting Yavorsky [3, 181].

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