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# Russian Music

Until the 19th century, musicians imported from France, Germany and Italy created most art music in Russia, and native Russians traveled to Europe for serious music study. *A Life for the Czar* (1836), an opera by **Mikhail Glinka** (1804–1857), stimulated nationalist interest. In 1862, the first professional music school, the **St Petersburg Conservatory**, was founded by **Anton Rubinstein** (1829–1894) to “create Russian musicians, instrumentalists and composers.”<sup>3</sup> Four years later, his brother **Nikolay Rubinstein** (1835–1881) founded the **Moscow Conservatory**.



Moscow Conservatory of Music

## Vladimir Rebikov (1866–1920)

**Vladimir Rebikov** was known as a pianist in Russia and abroad. He composed operas, ballets, orchestral suites, and several musico-psychological dramas, but his many outstanding piano miniatures are what have remained in the repertoire.



- Born in Siberia, Rebikov studied at the Moscow Conservatory and in Berlin and Vienna. He eventually settled in Moscow but traveled abroad for concert tours.
- His early works show the influence of **Peter Tchaikovsky** (1840–1893). (Tchaikovsky graduated from St. Petersburg and then taught at the Moscow Conservatory.) Around 1900, Rebikov began experimenting with more modern harmonies such as **bitonality** (two keys simultaneously), **whole-tone scales** and other techniques.
- Rebikov believed “*music is the language of the emotions*”<sup>4</sup> and that its purpose is to transmit this to a listener through sounds. Furthermore, forms and traditions should not restrict music since feelings are not limited, and music begins where words are inadequate.

<sup>2</sup> M. Montagu-Nathan, *Contemporary Russian Composers* (London: Cecil Palmer & Hayward, 1917), 181.

<sup>3</sup> Elsa Z. Posell, *Russian Composers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Montagu-Nathan, *Contemporary Russian Composers*, 184.

*“I was once a Chopinist, then a Wagnerist, now I am only a Scriabinist.”*

Alexander Scriabin<sup>5</sup>

## Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

In **Alexander Scriabin’s** brief lifetime, he was known mainly for his orchestral works. Today his 10 piano sonatas and about 200 shorter pieces are recognized for their soulful melodies, originality and musical value. He developed his own harmonic system and has been called *“a visionary who lost touch with reality.”*<sup>6</sup>

- Scriabin and his distant cousin **Sergei Rachmaninoff** (1873–1943) both attended the Moscow Conservatory where Scriabin was hailed as “Russia’s Chopin.” Beginning in a late Romantic style, his last works approach atonality.
- His egomania was evident when he refused “corrections” to one of his works, forcing his composition teacher **Anton Arensky** (1861–1906) to fail him. He won the Little Gold Medal in piano but never received a diploma in composition.
- Scriabin saw the artist (himself) as a redeemer and prophet whose purpose was to create music to give *“a glimpse of higher spiritual planes.”*<sup>7</sup> He wrote, *“I am God, I am the world, I am the center of the universe.”*<sup>8</sup> His philosophies were united with music in *The Poem of Ecstasy* (1908) and *Prometheus, The Poem of Fire* (1910), the world’s first multi-media composition. The score used a “color organ” that would flash colors into the hall synchronized with the music.
- He worked 12 years on *Mystery*, a synthesis of the arts, to be performed in a specially built amphitheater in India at the foot of the Himalayas. Scored for orchestra and a 2,000-voice chorus, it included dancers, poetry, color keyboard, perfumes, incense, and bells suspended from zeppelins (blimps). Intended to bring about the regeneration of the world and the purification of mankind, it was never completed.
- The Russian-born virtuoso pianist **Vladimir Horowitz** (1903–1989) at age 11 played for Scriabin and also heard him perform. Horowitz frequently used Scriabin’s *Vers la Flamme* (Toward the Flame), Op. 72, as an encore.



<sup>5</sup> Derek Watson, ed., intro. and selection, *Dictionary of Musical Quotations* (Ware Hertfordshire: Cumberland House, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), 188.

<sup>6</sup> Posell, *Russian Composers*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1961), 100.

<sup>8</sup> John Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1965), 272.

# Prelude in G Major

Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

Op. 13, No. 3

Andante, ♩ = 52–56

pp dolce  
legato

4

cresc.  
mf

8

pp  
cresc.  
mf

12

pp

16

ppp  
dolcissimo  
ppp

Ⓐ The RH chord on beat 1 of measures 8, 12, 16 and 18 may be rolled, if necessary, to play all the notes.

## Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

**Maurice Ravel**, the leading French composer after World War I, is considered to be one of the greatest piano composers of the 20th century. His orchestral works won him international fame with their brilliance and colorful scoring, and his piano pieces are part of any virtuoso’s repertoire. He wrote relatively few compositions, but almost all are in the performing repertoire.

- Born in the Basque region of France near the Spanish border, Ravel was raised in Paris. His mother sang Spanish folk songs to him, nurturing a fascination for Spanish music, rhythms and folklore. These influences are present in many of his works.
- Although he was a student at the Paris Conservatory, Ravel never won the top compositional *Prix de Rome*.<sup>17</sup> When he was rejected the fourth time, his reputation as a composer was already so great that outraged musicians brought about the resignation of the conservatory director, making Ravel even more famous.
- He tried to enlist in the armed forces during World War I, but was rejected because he was underweight. (Only about five feet tall, Cyril Scott stated, “*He [Ravel] was so small and slender that if he had not been a composer he might have made an excellent jockey.*”<sup>18</sup>) Still wanting to serve his country, he volunteered as an ambulance driver at the front lines taking wounded soldiers to medical care. Each movement of his *Le Tombeau de Couperin* for piano is dedicated to a friend who died in the war.
- Meticulously groomed, Ravel was always dressed elegantly, in the height of fashion with style and superb taste. His music has been described in much the same way—ultra-polished, suave, imaginative, and flawless in craftsmanship and proportion, with emotion perfectly controlled by the intellect.

*Maurice Ravel (right) and  
Vaclav Nijinsky (1890–1950),  
the principal dancer and then  
choreographer for the Ballet  
Russe in Paris*



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<sup>16</sup> Nat Shapiro, ed., *An Encyclopedia of Quotations about Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 56.

<sup>17</sup> This prize was awarded annually in music between 1803 and 1968, except during the two world wars, to a French composer under the age of 30, and was administered by the Paris Conservatory. Winners received financial support and a two- to five-year residency in Rome.

<sup>18</sup> Cyril Scott, *Bone of Contention: An Autobiography* (New York: Arco Publishing Co., 1969), 129.

*“You forgot that the piano had hammers when Debussy played ... and ... he achieved distinctive effects by the use of both pedals.”*

Léon Vallas (1879–1956), French critic <sup>20</sup>

## Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Many consider **Claude Debussy** to be the greatest French composer of all time and the most important composer for piano after **Franz Liszt** (1811–1886). His music exploits the tonal possibilities of the instrument in an original way. To express his impressions of the world in sound, Debussy “create[s] pictures, images and illusions [that] can sometimes seem miraculous.”<sup>21</sup>

- Many of Debussy’s composition professors at the Paris Conservatory were shocked at his unorthodox harmonies and disregard for textbook rules. More progressive teachers saw his genius, and as a result, he was awarded the *Prix de Rome* in 1884. During his residency in Rome, he met Franz Liszt and heard him play.
- The Universal Exhibition of 1889, and Debussy’s associations with **Erik Satie** (1886–1925) and the Impressionist painters and Symbolist poets all impacted the development of his unique style. His *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* for orchestra (1894) has been called the most original work in the history of music.
- *Réverie* and *Clair de lune* are probably Debussy’s best-known piano solos, but *Estampes* and *Images* show greater maturity. His 24 *Préludes* (two books of 12) are landmarks in the literature with their daring colors and atmospheric effects. They have been called scenes or “sense impressions” that “seem to give the ear eyes.”<sup>22</sup> The evocative titles of his *Préludes*, like *Feux d’artifice* (Fireworks) and *Voiles* (Sails or Veils), are placed at the end.



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*Claude Debussy at the piano in the home of composer Ernest Chausson (1855–1899)*

<sup>20</sup> Percy M. Young, *Keyboard Musicians of the World* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1968), 137.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Roberts, *Images, The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

*[After he performed at the White House] "It's only about 50 miles from the house where I was born, but it's a million miles in class."*

Eubie Blake<sup>35</sup>

## James Hubert "Eubie" Blake (1883–1983)

The son of former slaves, **Eubie Blake** paved the way for the equal acceptance of blacks in American entertainment. He wrote over 300 songs and instrumental pieces, music for six musical comedies and performed as a jazz pianist throughout his long life.

- When Blake began picking out tunes on a department store organ at age three, his mother agreed to pay twenty-five cents a week until the seventy-five dollar cost of the instrument was paid. He played music that he heard, and a local musician taught him theory and musical notation. When his mother told him to "Take that ragtime out of my house," he finally knew the name of the style he was playing.



*Eubie Blake at the piano with Noble Sissle*

- As a teenager, he performed in saloons on piano, as a melodeon player for a traveling medicine show, and as a dancer in a black minstrel show in New York City. In his twenties, he accompanied singers, played his own solos in Atlantic City, and began collaborating with the singer-lyricist **Noble Sissle** (1889–1975). They wrote hit songs, and as the "Dixie Duo" were one of the first successful African-American acts to play the white vaudeville circuit and to perform in Europe.
- In 1921 they wrote and starred in *Shuffle Along*, the first hit Broadway production written, directed, performed, and produced by black Americans. It introduced jazz dancing and grossed over eight million dollars. A song from the show, *I'm Just Wild about Harry*, was revived during the 1948 presidential campaign of **Harry Truman** (1884–1972). Eubie enrolled at New York University and completed a degree in composition in 1950.
- With renewed interest in ragtime, he performed at a Ragfest in St. Louis at the age of 83. It was reported that he outplayed all the younger pianists, sparking his second career as a performer, lecturer and personality. He played in Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, on PBS specials, at festivals throughout the United States and Europe, with the Boston Pops orchestra, and appeared 40 times on the Tonight Show with **Johnny Carson** (b. 1925).
- After receiving eight honorary doctorates, he was asked at age 96 how he felt about his new academic credentials. *"I guess now I won't have any trouble getting a job."*<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Al Rose, *Eubie Blake* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), 164.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.