

THE COLOUR OF THE SOUND. SKRJABIN AND DELVILLE: THE SYNAESTHETIC CHALLENGE

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Abstract: In 1911 Alexander Scriabin performs the symphony *Prometheus: the Poem of Fire*, in which he applies his theories on correspondence between sound and colour. Skrjabin met the theosophy painter Jean Delville and after composed a score perfectly overlapping a canvas that his friend had shown: *Prometheus*. The correspondence between the music and the painting is complete, not only because of the same range of shades of colours used, but also for the same sequencing of the colours. In an inter-artistic dialogue with music, painting and dance, the *Prometheus* of Scriabin-Delville realizes a synaesthetic ideal: the union of the arts.

Keywords: Skrjabin, Delville, Music and Painting, Colour Keyboard.

1. PROMETHEAN VISION

"What dreams sometimes I do! But they aren't dreams, they are visions, illusions that become tangible, sounds which are paintings." (BOWERS, 1973). Like this, in 1909, at friends' home, Skrjabin describes his last symphony. But, in reality, two years ago, it was a picture that, in his life, became truly sound. Inhabited with the illusion that sounds and colours, for some mysterious law, were connected, he believed that musical and chromatic tonality dialogued, corresponded. Therefore he continued to hear the vibration of the light as if it was a song and he apprehends the colours, not with the organ of the view, but with the ear. It was an authentic vision when, in 1907, entering in the Belgian painter's Jean Delville studio, near Brussels, he came across a gigantic canvas of Prometheus, of five meters per two and half [Fig.I].



Figure I. Jean Delville, Prométhée, 1907, Bibliothèque de Psychologie, Université Libre de Bruxelles.

When his eyes were placed on the mythical thief of the fire, the humanity's benefactor, the illusion became real. For the first time, in front of him, a true painted symphony floated, with all the music of colours, rich in those tones, symbols, depths and cosmic sense, that before he had not seen but in his dreams. It is not exaggerated to affirm that, when contemplating the *Prometheus* of Delville, Skrjabin apprehended in one look - as in a pre-vision, or in a pre-audition - the whole future symphony of colours, *Prometheus, the poem of fire*, which soon he would compose.

1.1 Iconography: between theosophy and numerology.

But what has Skrjabin seen in the *Prometheus* of Delville? Let us start with the iconography. Delville decides to stand back off a long tradition. The lines of his *Prometheus* reproduce the classic canon, but the leonine aspect of the figure is new, as well as the mysteriously lowered glance and the star of five points that substitutes the traditional torch. All of the iconographical innovations of Delville are rooted in the theosophical reading of the myth of *Prometheus*. To the first subject, about his leonine aspect, Edouard Schuré answers, in his famous text *Les Grands Initiés*: "Les Mages persans appelaient 'lion céleste' ce feu incorporel et 'serpents' les courants électriques de l'atmosphère magnétique de la terre, qu'ils prétendaient diriger comme des flèches sur les hommes." (SCHURÉ, 1960) All the faces of Delville's initiates, *Orpheus*, *Parsifal* and *Prometheus*, are in this sense descendent of the Magicians: guardians of the sacred fire, they have a fluent, radiant and golden mane, whose luminous radiations form an "aura" around the head. The head, as site of thought, produces vibrations associated to

the music and the planets: “La tête humaine est construite selon les rythmes des lois planétaires; elle est attractive et rayonnante, et c’est sur elle que l’influence astrale, d’ailleurs, se manifeste absolument.” (DELVILLE, 1895) The enigma of the Prometheus’s glance hides, however, other mysteries. What does this shady and simultaneously illuminated glance veil? What are these ambiguously closed and opened eyes? Is it a vision which includes all of the last and future existences by the light of the fire that he has between his hands? Or is a clairvoyant state, illuminated by the interior spark of the initiate? For Blavatsky “Prométhée est un voyant, mieux un clairvoyant, appartenant à la race des mystiques qui n’ont pas la vision limitée, mais qui ont déjà atteint la connaissance supérieure.” (BLAVATSKY, 1946) The star is a variant of the emblem of the theosophical Society, which is the star of six points, derived from two interlaced triangles, alluding to reunification between heaven and earth, spirit and matter, high and low. This Pentangle, or Pentagram, or Pentalfa marks a fundamental change in the life and in the spiritual course of the painter who adheres to *Loge Blanche’s* credo, from which he adopts the emblem. The pentagonal star is narrowly linked to the promethean myth, because its graphics recalls the track made by the planet Venus in their revolutions through the Zodiac. During its trip, the planet knows moments of invisibility and moments of extreme brightness, but when he approaches the Sun, it manifests its double nature: it is known as Star of the Morning, Phosphoros or Lucifer (light bearer), and as Star of the Night, Hesperos or Aphrodite (goddess of beauty, sensuality and peace). It is significant that the descendant of Lucifer’s race, the fallen angel Prometheus, has in his palms the star that represents his astral symbol. He presents himself in the imaginary of the two artists with an ambiguity: it is a damned hero, half-god, half-man, light bearer, the light of the knowledge of Good and Evil, the spark of intelligence, the fire of the intellect lit by the song of the sun. *Diabolus in musica* and *diabolus in pictura*. For Skrjabin, as for Delville “Prométhée, Satan et Lucifer se confondent dans le mythe ancien. Ils représentent l’énergie active du Cosmos, le principe créateur, le feu, la lumière, la vie, la lutte, l’effort, l’idée. Sa première manifestation, c’est l’attente impatiente, la soif de vivre.” (SABANEEV, 1911) A white symbolism (*L’Ange des Splendeurs* 1894, *Archange*, 1894) and a dark symbolism (*Les Trésors de Satan*, 1895; *La Méduse*, 1891; *L’Idole de la Perversité*, 1891; *La Fin d’un Royaume*, 1893) characterize the pictorial production of Delville, as well as the musical production of Skrjabin (*Poème Satanique*, 1903, *Messe Blanche*, 1911, *Messe Noire*, 1912-13). Blavatsky interprets the promethean myth in a phallic key: Prometheus is Pramantha, the stick that, quickly scrubbed in a hole done in the centre of another wood piece, provokes the sparkle. This hole, Arani, is the circle in which the star is enrolled. Prometheus is the vertical element, masculine, that unites with the circular element, feminine, and from this union is born the fire, in other words, life. Also

for the ancients the symbol of the pentagon represents the alchemic first matter, inexhaustible source of life, the sacred fire, the universal germ of all beings. Like this, Delville changes the physical fire, the torch, for the alchemic fire, the star. This star that Prometheus catches-without-catching, touches-without-touching, almost brushing, among his open palms, is not only the key for reading the myth, but also for the score that is inspired by him. Moreover: the star represents the matrix on which the two compositions, pictorial and musical, are built. It is the geometric translation of the theory of the golden number and of the golden section. Triple is the delvillean Prometheus, in the base of the rule of the golden rectangle, but septuple, in the base of other golden rectangles, enrolled inside the screen and suggested by the posture of the Titan, underlining the seven anatomical points [Fig.II], corresponding to the seven chakras of the root, of the thighs, of the sex, of the navel, of the heart, of the forehead and of the crown.



Figure II. Triple and septuple Prometheus.

In particular, this of the forehead, also called "chakra of the third eye", is the site of interior knowledge and it coincides with the idea of the Prometheus clairvoyant. This idea is intrinsic at the etymology of his name (pro-metheus, in other words, "is the one who sees and learns before"). The chakra of the crown, called Sahasrara, or the lotus of thousand petals, home of Shiva, the divine sparkle, represents, in opposite, the control of the spirit and the cosmic illumination that we reached when we went up the seven steps of the chakras, from the lowest to the highest. The centre of the tripartite Prometheus is his heart: donation and suffering, tension between the dawn of a wakening humanity and the afterlife world of the celestial truths. As a Boddhisattva, martyr of the Tibetan Buddhism that appears in the centre of a Pentalfa and, giving up his ecstasy, he sacrifices himself for mankind, Prometheus annuls himself, suffering the atonement and, disobeying Zeus. According with the oriental religions, Delville changes the traditional torch for a star.

A sacred numerology animates the composition of Skrjabin. Harmoniously, the Prometheus is built on a single chord, also called synthetic or mystic. All the themes are the uncoiling "horizontal" of this vertical

chord, constituted by six fourths superimposed: C-F#-Bb-E-A-D [Fig.III].

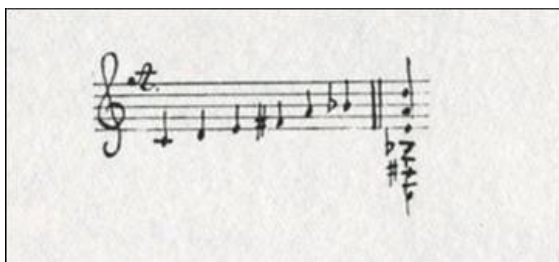


Figure III. Promethean Chord.

The recurrence of fourths in the promethean chord and the use of these in the themes prove that the number four becomes the creative and harmonic beginning of the whole symphony. According to Blavatsky, forth it is the stadium in the macrocosm where we lived us; forth is the epoch of the fifth race; forth is the step that the disciple has to accomplish to enter in the road of wisdom. In the harmonic and melodic passages of the Prometheus, there are plenty of fourths and fifths and five are the sections of the composition (Introduction, Exposition, Development, Recapitulation, Coda), just as the sections of the picture (legs, trunk, head, stars, luminous ray) [Fig. IV].

Sections of the Symphony	Bars	Bars' number per Section	Relation between first and second part of the Symphony
Introduction	1-30	30	374
Exposition	31-162	132	
Development	163-374	212	
Recapitulation	375-511	137	
Coda	512-606	95	

Figure IV. Sections of the Symphony and numeric relations.

Moreover: from the division between the first and second part of the work results the golden number: 1,618. Therefore in the symphony, as in the picture, we can catch in a glimpse, in filigree, the form of a Prophetic Star. Architecturally the symphony is built accordingly with the anthropomorphic symbolism of the 4 and of the 5 in Vitruvius and Leonardo, with the "Trinitarian human", in Schuré, with the tree-partition of the soul in Steiner and with the human septuple, in Blavatsky: forth is the interval of the synthetic chord, five the sections of the work, three the colours that are superimposed to the progression of the chords, seven are the colours of the spectrum correspondent to the musical and chromatic scale elaborated by Scriabin. The painting is not by chance, as the demonstration of the golden section reveals, the exact half of a square, where the 7 colours of the spectrum live, and, in consequence, the 7 sounds and the 7 planets with their 7 rays. All this does not reflect a casual coincidence.

1.2 Paintings which are sounds.

From the point of view of the colour, the composer suffers a kind of hypnotic obsession. Genuinely glowed by the canvas, Scriabin makes, of his

symphony, a synaesthetic work. Besides the enormous instrumental organic, which includes orchestra, double choir, organ, celesta, he serves himself of a new instrument, *le clavier à lumière*, a kind of piano in which to each key corresponds a coloured ray of light [im.5]. This utopian instrument, synchronically with the music, should flood the room and the spectators, not with sounds, but with colours. To accomplish that, Scriabin pursues in London the English Wallace Rimington and orders from the Russian Aleksander Mozer the construction of a mechanism of flasks that, in the height of the *première*, of the Prometheus, the 15th March 1911, in Moscow, didn't work [Fig. V].

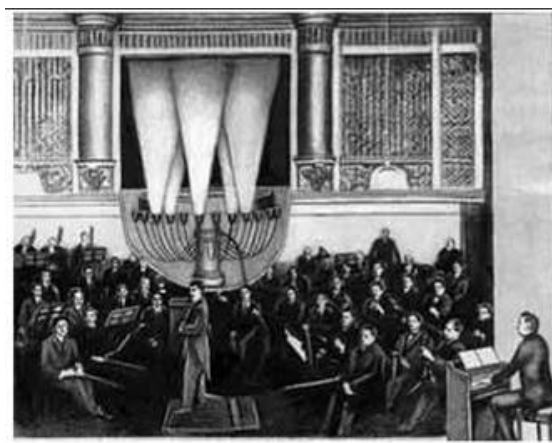


Figure V. Prometheus's first performance.

Scriabin theorized the relation sound-colour, associating to each nuance a note and building a true musical *palette*, subdividing the chromatic scale in twelve tones, indicating in the staff of the colour keyboard, through the name of the notes, the corresponding colours [Fig.VI].

C	red
C#	violet
D	yellow
D#	violet
E	gray-steel
F	white-blue
F#	brownish-red
G	bright-blue
G#	rose-orange
A	green
A#	purple
B	gray-steel
B#	white-blue

Figure VI. Scriabin's sound-colour palette.

Analyzing this score, we notice the simultaneous presence of two notes and therefore of two iridescent rays [Fig.VII].



Figure VII. Colour Keyboard's score.

In the staff, the inferior voice indicates a bottom colour relatively stable that proceeds with jumps of whole tones, underlining the humanity's passage from the inferior stadium to the following, in a spiritual evolution, that even should arrive, according to the author, to convert the listener. In opposite the superior voice, much more movable, accompanies the

harmonic movement of the music, interfering, as a ray, in the bottom of the other, creating like this, for superimposition, a third colour emerging by the sum of the other two. Not enrolled in the score, but savoured by the spectator, the third colour should, according to Skrjabin, reveal him the secret mysteries of a transcendental world, annulling all the differences between eye and ear, vision and audition. In the superior part, dynamic, diachronic and mobile, Skrjabin wanted to express the exoteric sense, turning visible the iridescence of the chords of the orchestra. It is the human stadium. The inferior part embodies, in opposite, the esoteric sense, the symbolic and static substratum, hidden in depth, occult in the music, of which doesn't reveal the external aspects, but only those unalterable and mysterious. It is the cosmic world. Prometheus embodies, in my opinion, the third colour, the middle-walk between the human stadium and the cosmic stadium: it is the astral world. Both in the symphony and in the picture, Prometheus is a mediator, a communicator, a ladder between two worlds, the human and the divine.

The score crosses different colour gradations, respecting the succession of the canvas. Each colour, for Skrjabin, not only corresponds to a musical note, but also to a spiritual meaning.

In this sense, the encounter with Annie Besant and Charles Leabdeater, inventors of the theosophical card of the colours, in the course of a passage in England, will be fundamental for the musician [Fig.VIII].

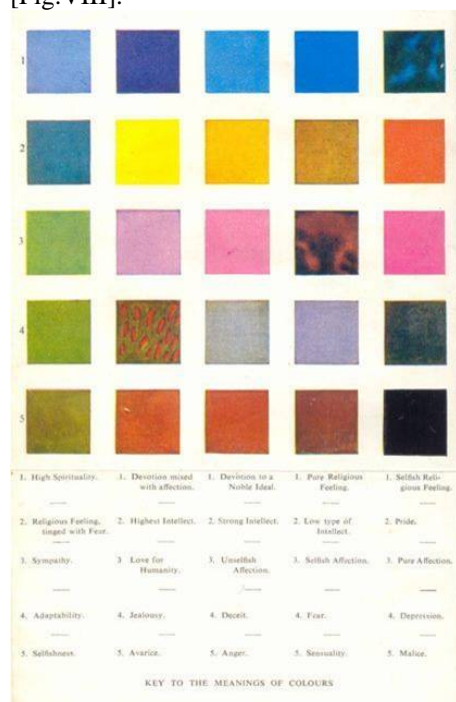


Figure VIII. Annie Besant and Charles Leabdeater, theosophical card of colours.

The score traces the chromatic sequence and the mystic meaning of the painting, in a low glance upward. Through the blue of the high spirituality and of the green of the primordial humanity's unconsciousness, Skrjabin paints in music the *Brumeux, Avec mystère, Avec Douleur* of initial

chaos, corresponding in Delville to the low area of the canvas, to the foot of the hero [Fig.IX];

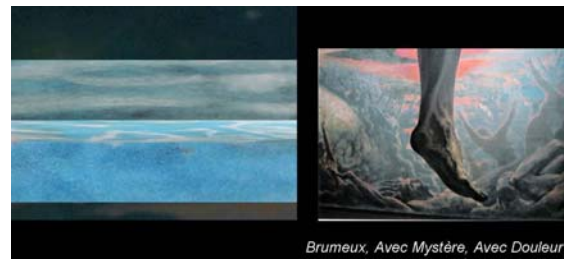


Figure IX. Initial Chaos.

through the rose of the virginal passion, he mentions the *Joyeux, Délicat, Contemplatif* of the delvillean *aube de l'humanité* [Fig.X];



Figure X. Dawn of Humanity.

through the grey-steel, the white-blue, the purple of the inebriation, the orange and the violet of the immortality identifies the *Voilé, Mystérieux* and the clouds that surround the legs of the running hero [Fig.XI];



Figure XI. The running Hero.

through the red of the superb pride portrays the *Avec un intense désir, Avec douleur, Impérieux* of the blazing and sufferer heart of Prometheus [Fig.XII];



Figure XII. Prometheus's heart.

through the white-sky and the white-blue he imitates the effect *limpide, cristallin* of the planetary rays [Fig.XIII].

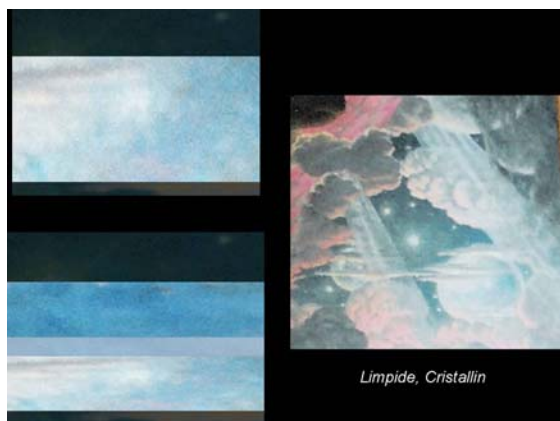


Figure XII. The planetary rays.

But when finally we arrive to the star and the luminous beam, this allusion levels the plagiarism of the canvas by the score: we attended a true verbal, visual and musical explosion, explosion that adheres so much to the canvas that becomes its visualization. The yellow of the audacious intelligence, the blue of the spirituality, the rose of the virginal passion, the gray-steel, the orange, the purple of inebriation, the red of pride, repeated in a fast succession of frames, translates the *Avec défi, belliqueux, orageux, sublime, victorieux, avec émotion et ravissement, puis voilé mystérieux* [Fig. XIV]



Figure XIV. Promethean star.

and the *Avec un splendide éclat, déchirant, comme un cri, de plus en plus lumineux et flamboyant, extatique, étincelant, avec un éclat éblouissant, ailé, dansant, flot lumineux* [Fig. XV]

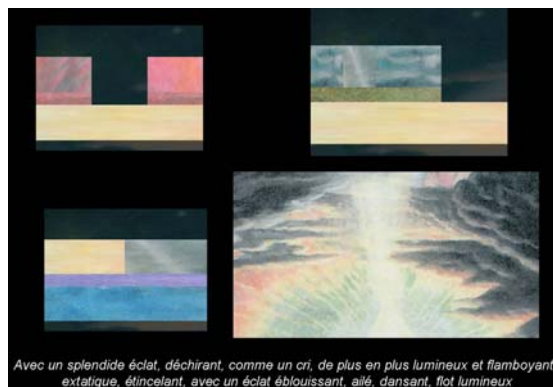


Figure XV. Star's Aura.

corresponding to the superior part of the canvas. It is the hero's aura that extinguishes in the firmament over the star, ending in the bright-blue that dominates the final part, *Dans une vertige* [Fig. XVI].



Figure XVI. The Firmament over the star.

It is the ecstasy. And we notice here the mystery of the disappearance of the torch from the hand of Prometheus: the star substitutes the torch because Prometheus, himself, is a gigantic incandescent torch, incandescent of love for humanity. In the summit, in the indigo, is fulfilled the apotheosis of Prometheus, that waits for him, after having explored the lilac and the purple of the fires and of the clouds, the high celestial spheres, in an ascension that reaches the absolute. Here, over the star and in the acme of the musical composition, resounds a perfect superior chord built on the note fundamental F #, executed by the choir on the vowel A. This is the only consonant chord of the whole work and Skrjabin dyes it of a very bright blue, making it precedent of a fast sequence of all the colours of the spectrum, from which the white ray, is freed, resultant from the iridescent and psychedelic vision. As we know from Goethe, in fact, the white is not a color absence, but the potential presence of all the tones of the prism. Similarly silence can not be an absence of sounds, but the potential presence of all the voices and all the timbres. It is the music of silence, this from this dumb but eloquent choir, that seems to incarnate the private sounds of the Music of the Spheres, pursued by Skrjabin, in the traces of Delville, in a chimerical challenge for the total work of art. The *Dégradé* of blue, of red and white is identical in the partition and the screen. Covering it in one glance the mythical canvas, Skrjabin places it at our level, we the spectators, in front of the gigantic image. In this direction, the point of view of the composer, ours and

the humanity rescued by Prometheus coincides, they are all at the same the level. The allure of the symphony of the fire is all here: in one only *coup of œil* ascendant, not only through the chromatic indications, but also from the psychological ones, with which the musician substitutes the traditional agogical terms as *prestissimo* or *andante*.

1.3 Sounds which are paintings.

The symphony of the picture becomes sound and, in turn, it is a sound that is transformed into painting. Skrjabin trusts to Delville the task of drawing a frontispiece that fulfills the function of a program [Fig.XVII].

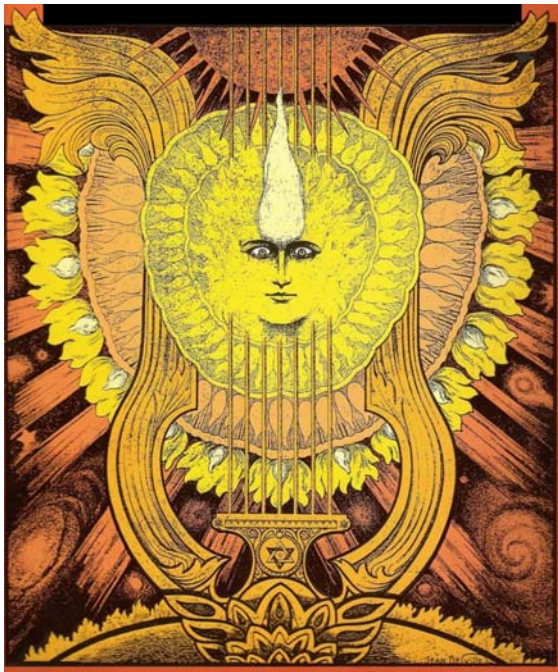


Figure XVII. Jean Delville, frontispiece to the Skrjabin's Symphony : *Prométhée, Poème du feu*, 1911.

Reduced, synthetic, allegoric, emblematic, almost heraldic, this second delvillean Prometheus assumes the triple function of frontispiece to the printed edition, of visual program of the work, in absence of a literary commentary and, finally, of philosophical manifesto. The esoteric numerology, unveiled here, is the essence, the key, the symbol of the partition, as well in the drawing. The flame between the eye brows, site of the third eye of the clairvoyant, is reanimated by the solar rays and touches the fourth string of the lira. The lira with the seven strings contains in the centre a leonine face, with an incandescent mane, as in the painting. The small flames around the face of the hero are placed in three concentric circles, formed by 12, 24, 48 flames of fire. This numerical progression symbolizes the fast propagation of the flames, inherent capacity to the fire. The theosophical emblem of the Star is again the one with six points, instead of the Pentalfa, joining itself it the serpent *Ouroboros*, which states the eternity and the cyclic nature of time, from Life to Death, from Chaos to Cosmos, from Pain to Ecstasy.

This reactionary choice by Delville adheres to the skrjabinean conception of the circular trip of the souls between the earth and the sky. In the Poem of the fire, in fact, there is a continuous, counterbalanced movement, from above to down and from down to above, expressed by the jumps of ninths descendant and fourths ascendants. It is breathing, better, the inspiration and expiration of the soul, jumping continuously through the perpetual cycle of the incarnations, from the Spirit to the Matter, from the Matter to the Spirit. The two interlaced triangles with the opposing points, visualize this idea while the final release in the ecstasy corresponds to the flight in ether, composed by these cosmic symbols, these whirlwinds, these stars and these planets that appear below: a waving *cosmos* on which the lira floats. Below we glimpse the lotus flower, which blossoms in three concentric corollas, with 5-5-3 petals, each one respectively. From myth, Prometheus becomes icon. The flash of Prometheus, lit by the song of the sun, sets on fire the music, the lira that, in turn, transmits it to the earth. This face overlapping he lira melts in the imaginary the figures of Prometheus and Orpheus. Thus the initial passage from the painting to the sound withdraws from the sound to the painting. Jean Delville plays with the ambiguity of the inspirer-inspired: at the beginning directs the steps of his disciple to the discovery of the theosophical roots of his intuitions. Later he receives this influence in his painting, painting that becomes more and more musical and syncretic.

1.4 After Prometheus. The Total Art Work.

Prometheus is a dancing hero. The dance of Prometheus is a millenary dance through the ages and planets. If Delville was interested in the dance as cosmic key, Skrjabin considered it a work instrument. Therefore he collaborated with Alicia Koonen, the famous Russian dancer. She improvised the steps, while the composer played the chords of *Prometheus* in the piano and the room was dyed with coloured lights, projected by a rudimentary game of candles and filters. Moreover. The image of the dance of the souls, in the ascension until the ecstatic, spiritual, cosmic union, had shown to Skrjabin, in the instant when he visited for the first time the atelier of the painter. [Fig. XVIII]



Figure XVIII. Jean Delville, *L'amour des âmes*, 1900.

Love of the souls, 1900 is constructed on the principle of the double sphere, of the infinite, of the eight, that sends, not by chance, to drafts found in the notebooks of the composer for his final dream, its last unfinished composition, *Mysterium*, [Fig. XIX].

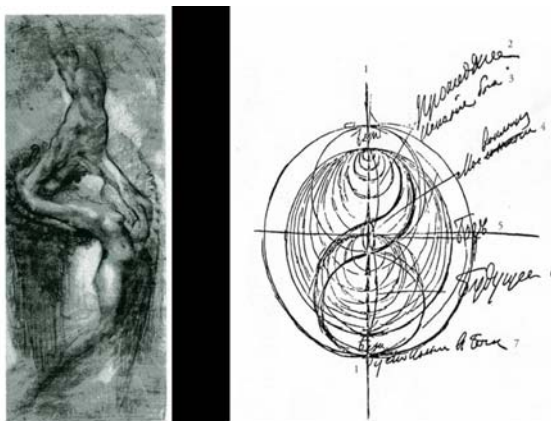


Figure XIX. Jean Delville, sketch for *L'amour des âmes*, and Aleksandr Skrjabin, sketch for *Mysterium*.

The semispherical building with twelve entrances, in the edges of the Gange, had to be constructed in order that, mirroring itself in the water, could reflect a complete sphere [Fig.XX].

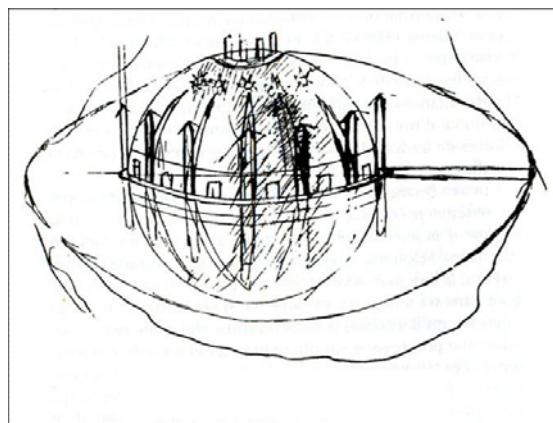


Figure XX. Aleksandr Skrjabin, sketch for *Mysterium*.

The project foresaw the cooperation of all the arts, including dance, music, architecture, sculpture, painting, having to involve all the senses, feel, taste, hearing, sight and smell, in a initiatic rite of several days that would have to lead to a general ecstasy, capable to annul the difference between the individual and the collective, between the players and the public. Thus, in a new “Bayreuth Indiana”, Skrjabin dreamed to reach what, in *Prometheus*, he had partially realized: the union of all the arts.

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