

Title: The Russian Symbolist Dispersion of Light: Viacheslav Ivanov and Aleksandr Skriabin

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This talk examines the artistic collaboration between the arcane, multilingual, erudite Russian Symbolist poet and theoretician Viacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949) and Aleksandr Skriabin (1872-1915), a composer of Wagnerian, synthetic persuasions. Ivanov and Skriabin were kindred souls and mystically prepared the transfiguration of the world in their work that meant to wed poetry, music, colors, and lights. They first met in 1909, and, under the influence of Ivanov, Skriabin was writing dithyrambic poetry for his unfinished apocalyptic multi-medial “Preparatory Act” and “The Mysterium” until his death in 1915.

By looking at the Symbolist poetics of light in Viacheslav Ivanov’s early poetry collection “Transparency” (1904), his essay on Skriabin “Skriabin’s View on Art” (1915), and the extant text of Skriabin’s unfinished “Preparatory Act” (1913-1915), I examine how metaphors of divine light, its dispersions and refractions, inform both Symbolist artists’ conception of music, poetry, and mystical merger. I will think through the idea of the dispersion of light as synaesthetic and interartistic, promoting the exchange among the arts in Russian Symbolism. The dispersion of white light into colors is also a dispersion into a multiplicity of senses and a multiplicity of arts. This proliferation of colors, senses, and arts, which constitutes Russian Symbolist light, is also linked to the regenerating pieces of the dismembered Orpheus in Ivanov’s understanding of the god. This fascinating interplay of poetry, music, and light in the Orphic myth prompts Ivanov to identify Skriabin with the figure of Orpheus. Thus, for Ivanov, Skriabin’s death fulfills the Symbolist transfiguration of reality.