A Reader's Guide to the Chopin Preludes

Jeffrey Kresky

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Preface

If by "criticism" we mean not the common activity in journalism but the more intellectual or academic pursuit as it is found surrounding the literary and visual arts, then the absence of this practice in the world of music is a noteworthy phenomenon. So laments musicologist Joseph Kerman in his book *Contemplating Music.* Perhaps this lack has something to do with certain striking and fundamental differences between music and the other arts, which are in a sense open to contemplation at leisure (whereas music will not wait for you as you think about it). Moreover, moments of music seem inherently less easy to describe in words than literature (which, after all, itself communicates through words) or visual phenomena.

This book is offered as a work of criticism akin to the variety of "reader's guides" to famous written works or bodies of literature. In hesitating to make use of the facilely parallel label "listener's guide," I am wary of the casual approach to musical material such a phrase calls to mind ("program notes" and the like).

"Reader's guides" are often found for works that seem to require them by virtue of their own innate difficulty—as if one

needed a map to get through some very difficult stretch of land; and the Chopin preludes are not obscure in this sense. But we find such guides also for works such as the plays of Shakespeare. Here, we discover that blend of analysis (however construed or styled), opinion (ideally representing a generally informed, educated turn of mind, and not some idiosyncratic or overly personal opinion—although a certain personal approach may be helpful in the guiding process), and—for lack of any better term for it—"musings," that may accompany the great, complex works of literature and be the looked-for "companion" to the reading experience, the experience of remembering and integrating the work.

Thus, although considerable analysis in the quite usual pitch-specific sense will occur in most of the discussions of these little pieces, commentary of other sorts will also be found: aesthetic, historical—in short, just those things that would seem to make up the kind of sophisticated "music appreciation" that perhaps is the best equivalent in music to the intellectually oriented critical enterprise as it is known and respected in literature.

Such a companion to the Chopin preludes has a variety of intended uses. Like its presumed counterparts in literature, it can be read by the academically inclined music lover—though the heavy amount of technical information required to follow the analytic descriptions and arguments would call for a well-remembered college study of music theory through most of its stages. But as a direct adjunct to college-level or graduate school study, the book might easily fit into courses or seminars in analysis, in piano literature, or in the period study of the nineteenth century. Isolated chapters could well serve for adjunct analytic work in upper-level theory courses.

Finally, in mentioning the obvious corequisite to this book—namely a good copy of the score to the music—I come to a crucial difference between companions or guides to music and those to literature. The work of literature and the guide to it exist in the same medium. Not so, of course, for music. Returning to the phrase "listener's guide" may suggest that one needs only a recorded performance to complement this work of commentary; while a "reader's guide" might imply, once again, the score. Obviously, the *listening* experience and appreciation of the preludes is what is aimed at here. But, as implied earlier, the printed score is

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the only convenient form of the music in which it can be contemplated, consulted, and considered: moments can be lingered over, reviewed, appreciatively or microscopically (and I see no reason why these two ways need contradict); and the printed page can often seem to condense or summarize music, which otherwise, of course, takes its own time. The moment in music—being a *moment*—vanishes at once, and can only be remembered or repeated. At least on the score we have it there before us, perhaps as an aid to more precise and complete memory, and less cumbersome repeating. I argue not for the score as substitute for the music—any more than for the text of a play rather than its actual performance: but in both cases the text is surely crucially convenient if we are to think carefully about what has otherwise disappeared, or at least faded in detail.

As to the matter of choice of particular text for these pieces, let it be noted that although any editor's tamperings with some pure or original version of this music will have yielded a score that features elements not necessarily accounted for in these discussions, the result is little different from the combination of these analyses with any given performed version of these pieces, which is likewise bound to "interpret" the music.

Introduction

Through most of its history as a title of a piece of music, the term *prelude*—literally "before the game" and probably just that originally—denoted the intent of the composition as a precursor of some other, larger composition to follow (of which the prelude itself may or may not have been a part). Hence, it could establish the key, or the mood, or the style of whatever followed, and for a large variety of reasons. A particularly clear (and historically late) instance would be the establishment of mood (or, quite differently, the unfolding of major melodic themes to come) before the curtain rises on an opera.

Chopin's twenty-four preludes for piano, taken either individually or as a group, are quite obviously preludes to nothing—unless each is prelude to the next prelude. This may have been a historically pivotal situation—in the sense of its heralding a change in the application of this title, such pieces soon becoming "character pieces" in their own right. (And, indeed, one later comes upon like groupings of preludes from Debussy, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Gershwin.) But in this particular, and probably

seminal, case, the observation serves to introduce us to a general understanding of these pieces. For if a prelude in the earlier sense is intended to establish a mood, and these preludes succeed *only* in doing that (in the sense of omitting the presumably more important matter to follow), then the whole notion of setting mood, of striking poses, is thrown into stark relief.

Indeed, emotional and stylistic mood is the very hallmark of the nineteenth century, the romantic style. The prior periods featured in some variety their own allowable moods, but the nineteenth century specializes in it—starting, of course, with the emotionally charged moods of Beethoven, and typified most simply by the feeling-laden world of grand opera, ballet, and tone poem. In the Chopin preludes we have twenty-four distinct moods, each in miniature. The group as a whole may stand almost as a summary of the imaginable mood types available to the romantic composer, a veritable museum of the expressive possibilities opening up to the composer in Chopin's century.

Taken as a whole, the preludes present each mood attempted, posed, considered, and then dropped delicately as the silence between the pieces ushers in the next, while also setting to rest the previous. So we find among these types the combative, the brooding, the proud, the tender, the skittish, and so forth: words being plainly inadequate, even in the introspective sense, to capture their emotionally concrete suggestions. They may likewise be seen as experiments in musical surface, in the formation of surface expressive of a certain frame of musical attitude or mind. One may be enigmatic, another despairing, another jubilant, and the like.

The question of the organic unity and status of the collection—are these preludes twenty-four pieces, or one (in twenty-four parts)?—is not just interesting, but perhaps unique. Clues to an answer may lie in comparison with other like groupings. Chopin himself, as any piano student knows, wrote pieces in clusters, the title—indicating a "type"—held in common. Thus there are the waltzes, the mazurkas, and so forth, where "the" ought really to appear in quotes, to cast doubt on the significance of the grouping as any more than a convenience. When we hear in succession a number of his waltzes, say, we experience one and then another of a certain kind of piece; they don't fit together as much as simply

remake each other. Published together (although in many cases originally written and published in smaller clusters), recorded together, even performed together, they constitute a "list" rather than an extended composition. But the preludes, alone among Chopin's output (and published under a single opus number),[1] are a different matter entirely. There is, first of all, a key scheme or succession that makes the connections between the pieces both compelling and natural. It is instructive to consult first the key succession in the preludes and fugues of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Klavier*, another grouping that exhausts the twenty-four major and minor keys in as many pieces. Here we find each prelude-and-fugue pair a half step higher than the previous (a pair in the major and then a pair in the minor at each step, actually). The move from major to parallel minor may well be heard in "compositional" terms, as a shifting or adjustment of mode; but the move up is not tonal in any usual sense, keys a half step apart having pretty much nothing in common in normal tonal ways. In terms of key, these pieces seem merely arranged in size place.

But key successions that have compositional value—that is, that express in the large something grammatically coherent—make for connected, interrelated listening (which is, in a sense, what being "a piece" entails). In the Chopin preludes we have a major key followed by its *relative* minor (a more organic, less categorical connection), and then the whole pair replaced by the like pair a perfect fifth higher. (The first prelude is in C major, the second in a minor; the third in G major, the fourth in e minor, and so forth.) In both this and the Bach scheme, all twelve keys (twenty-four, including pairings with minor) will be achieved. But in the case of the Chopin, the route *through* these keys will seem itself "musical": the move into the next major key from the relative minor of the previous major key will feature certain automatic correspondences in terms of shared scale tones, chords, and the like. Indeed, these possibilities are not compositionally exploited by the composer, but seem instead to lurk under the surface, enforcing an even flow of convincing naturalness. Thus, after the second prelude becomes the relative minor of the first, the third, in G, will seem to treat the just-evaporating a-minor cadence chord as ii in a new key—and so on. The composer is, on the other hand, occasionally careful to emphasize the obvious tonic-triad pitch links

that obtain between a major prelude and the next minor one (two pitches of each major tonic sonority being retained to become pitches of the new minor tonic): for example, special re-soundings of last notes as new first notes abound. The G-major prelude ends with two rolled tonic chords, B on top; that very B then begins the slow, piece-long treble descent in the next prelude. The D♯ that tops the final chord of the quiet No. 11 then rushes off in a new mood in No. 12; the lone C that begins the opening solo gesture of No. 18 seems clearly lifted off the top of the just-faded prior tonic chord; moods switch on the G held at the top of the E♭ chord at the end of No. 19 when No. 20 begins; and, in a switch as far as this sort of link is concerned, the *lowest* pitch that ends No. 21 reappears alone as No. 22 begins, and passes by step to the new tonic, to which it seems almost to deliver or transfer tonic status. These gentle connections have a distinctly "piece-like" effect on the overall flow of the preludes.

Contrary to this observation that the keys here essentially form a tonally significant *progression*, as opposed to the *tonally* arbitrary arrangement in the Bach, is the fact that normally tonal progressions—whether locally (within phrases) or in the large (across and among movements of a large piece)—ultimately accomplish an overall coherence, usually in terms of beginning and end points. That is, the keys of the four movements in a symphony will, considered in the large, expand upon something significant about the overall key of the symphony (started as the basic key of the first movement, restored certainly in the last movement, and not just challenged or departed from in the middle movements, but explored or expanded by way of keys that have something to do with the basic key). But the key scheme in the Chopin preludes just keeps moving on, starting with C and ending in d minor. So if it locally moves musically, it does not seem to in sum. This last aspect then detracts from the one-piece impression of the group.

Then there is the matter of the movement across the preludes in terms of moods. Again, comparison with a true multimovement piece such as a symphony, and with a group like *The Well-Tempered Klavier*, is instructive. In the latter case, again, we see no compelling balances or flows as the pieces progress (and with any other common-named grouping of Chopin, we would only hear each piece *repeat* the type of the previous, with minimal change in

mood). In the symphony, on the other hand, clearly the moods present a picture of contrasts, balances, and so forth.

In the Chopin preludes we find the greatest care taken to assure that a piece of one stark type is followed by a striking and refreshing contrast, in terms of mood, length, scope, intensity. This, then, is another piece-like aspect of the preludes. (Often one hears subsets of these preludes performed in recital, and the listener may find both the key connections and the mood connections disturbed; the original ordering then seems all the more satisfying.)

Finally, there is the matter of motivic intermovement connections, such as one occasionally finds enriching the true multimovement works. Such connections may be so frank (as, say, in the fourth symphony of Schumann) that one may feel robbed of the full thematic possibilities of so large a work. But more subtly composed, they may be highly satisfying unifying devices (for example, the prominent neighbor-note motive found throughout the second symphony of Brahms, or the dotted-eighth and sixteenth repeated-note gesture in the first and last movements of his G-major sonata for violin and piano; such motivic consistency in opera is another case entirely, and functions quite differently, but yet unifies vast stretches of musical experience).

Motivic recurrences of this kind are lacking across the Chopin preludes. But a far subtler process is sometimes detectable. Consider the start of Prelude No. 2. After the slow introductory accompaniment, the melodic E seems to revive the sound from the top of the last moment of the previous prelude. It then moves on to D to complete the opening unit of melody. This pair was a prominent feature of the earlier piece (see mm. 5, 6, 7, 26 and 28). Its influence continues on into Prelude No. 3, where it extrudes from the opening accompaniment figure, and also from the melody in its first phrase. Perhaps this figure starts to fade now; but not before it is directly imitated by C–B (m. 5). *This* pair then echoes through the first four bars of the fourth prelude—only to be replaced by A and B (mm. 5–8), which pair precisely gets the next prelude started! Long and thorough acquaintance with the preludes seems to conjure such intriguing continuities out of the music.

I conclude, therefore, that the Chopin preludes form a quite unique musical organism, much like, say, the sense in which a

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society of ants or a coral formation is viewed as being simultaneously a collection of individuals and a super-organism of many small parts. If in such instances biologists can describe each ant as more individual than the cells or organs of one higher animal, but less "complete" than one higher animal, we can conceive of these preludes as occupying just such a middle position. Individually they seem like pieces in their own right, if perhaps too brief otherwise to stand on their own. But each works best along with the others, and in the intended order. With a symphony too we may experience each movement as a complete piece, which, however, benefits greatly by inclusion in and presentation with the surrounding movements of the larger piece. The Chopin preludes seem to be at once twenty-four small pieces and one large one. As we note or sense at the start of each piece the various connections to and changes from the previous one, we then feel free to involve ourselves—as listeners, as players, as commentators—only with the new pleasure at hand.

The preludes well reward study and intimate familiarity. They occupy a special place in Chopin's output, and are in the opinion of many his best music (alongside the large ballades). Considering the titanic status of Chopin in the pianist's repertory, and the central, representative role of piano music in the totality of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composition, we can view the preludes, in their joint summation and advancement of the developing possibilities of romantic expression, as a beacon of the musical thought of their era.

At the same time, the large number of strikingly different musical surfaces presents a splendid opportunity for an equally varied experimentation in analytic and critical commentary. Therefore, in these chapters, the emphasis or even style of attention may vary from piece to piece. But also, it must be said, some of the pieces invite more scrutiny than others. There is a marked difference in complexity among them, and, also, in the apparent care with which they have been created: the collection is somewhat uneven in quality. A few of the pieces, of course, are celebrated. Some are truly great. But it is difficult to respond with depth or sincerity to those few that seem only roughly or superficially realized. Thus, this guide will now linger, now rush, as the music strikes the guider; but the reader may surely wander at a self-chosen pace.

NOTE

1. These considerations certainly exclude the lone other prelude, opus 45.

A Reader's Guide to the Chopin Preludes

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	xiii
Prelude No. 1 in C Major	1
Prelude No. 2 in A Minor	9
Prelude No. 3 in G Major	15
Prelude No. 4 in E Minor	19
Prelude No. 5 in D Major	27
Prelude No. 6 in B Minor	31
Prelude No. 7 in A Major	37
Prelude No. 8 in F♯ Minor	41
Prelude No. 9 in E Major	47
Prelude No. 10 in C♯ Minor	53

Prelude No. 11 in B Major 57
Prelude No. 12 in G♯ Minor 61
Prelude No. 13 in F♯ Major 65
Prelude No. 14 in E♭ Minor 73
Prelude No. 15 in D♭ Major 77
Prelude No. 16 in B♭ Minor 83
Prelude No. 17 in A♭ Major 87
Prelude No. 18 in F Minor 95
Prelude No. 19 in E♭ Major 99
Prelude No. 20 in C Minor 105
Prelude No. 21 in B♭ Major 111
Prelude No. 22 in G Minor 117
Prelude No. 23 in F Major 121
Prelude No. 24 in D Minor 125

For Further Reading 129

Prelude No. 1 in C Major

The rolling buoyancy and adventuresome spirit of the first prelude—so apt for this case of "starting out"—are due to the wave-like motion that is heard both in the agitated one-bar gesture presented in each measure and in the single arched span which rises and falls over the course of the piece as the smaller units accrue. The music can be felt to swell over the first eight bars, cresting modestly at m. 5 and gently subsiding (with the decrescendo) to its own starting level in m. 9; it will rise again from there to m. 15, and then a slight fallback is followed by a continued push upward, to a climax at m. 21 (ff), and a precipitous recovery back to ground level at m. 25 (p). From there to the end the motion levels off and quiets down. Thus the early swells are subsumed under a single, embracing contour.

This is the shape of the individual measure as well. Beginning with a single low tone, each next attack brings a higher note until a peak is reached on the fourth attack, after which the motion falls away.

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