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In Gabriel Solis & Bruno Nettl, eds., Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009)

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PRELUDING AT THE PIANO

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In the Classic and early Romantic periods of European music, there was an established practice of playing an improvised prelude before a written composition. The most famous notated preludes of the period are Frédéric Chopin's 24 *Préludes* (Op. 28), published at Paris, Leipzig, and London in 1839. Today they are generally performed in concert as a single, continuous work. This article investigates the improvisation practice and seeks a new understanding of how Chopin's preludes relate to it.

Most writers on preludes have been chiefly concerned with the finished artifact. This approach is still reflected in leading reference works. Howard Ferguson, in the revised *New Grove Dictionary*, does not mention the improvised prelude (2001). He rightly calls Chopin's preludes the "prototype" of many later sets, but he has nothing to say about their immediate precursors, or their origins in improvisation. Like other scholars, he assumes that they were modeled directly on Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (*WTC*), in part because they use all the major and minor keys in an orderly succession. On the other hand, Arnfried Edler in *MGG*, while listing a number of pre-Chopin sets as following in the Bach tradition, sees Chopin's preludes, in contrast, as strongly imbued with the character of French keyboard music (1997, 1801). But he too fails to consider their relationship to improvisation.

Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, a leading authority on Chopin's life and music, acknowledges the existence of earlier published sets of preludes in all the keys; the ones he lists date from 1811 to 1828 (1988). But he claims that "Chopin was in only the slightest degree dependent on his predecessors. If some of his preludes give the impression of being improvised, it is by means that have nothing to with anything that had gone before" (1988, 173). He considers that the *WTC* was the model for all the earlier sets, and that Chopin's are even more profoundly influenced by Bach: "Ignoring the legacy of his immediate predecessors, deaf to the contemporary world, the Chopin of the preludes anchored himself in Bach so as to see himself more clearly—and, despite himself, into the future" (185).

Eigeldinger also makes a point of denying that Chopin's preludes are introductory pieces, claiming instead that they are a unified cycle. Since this is not obvious to the naked eye or ear, he tries to prove their unity by ingenious analysis. "If the Preludes are an organic whole, they must be put together according to certain structural principles: it remains to be discovered what they are and how the volume's unity is achieved over and above its diversity" (180). He thereupon "discovers" the presence of a three-note musical motive X (or another one, Y, consisting of X plus a fourth note) in each of the 24 preludes. To achieve this extraordinary feat, he allows himself to transpose, curtail, or invert the motives at will; to select their notes from different parts of the texture or from the middle of a phrase; and to ignore extraneous notes that come between those of the motive (186–93). He does not explain why, if Chopin wished to "unify" the preludes, he gave no hint of his plan and chose a method that would escape the notice of critics, performers, and analysts for nearly 150 years.

The theory is unconvincing. With the degree of freedom that Eigeldinger allows himself, one could find short melodic fragments in common between almost any two pieces. His theory is an "unfalsifiable proposition" (Popper 1959, 40). Let us suppose that Chopin actually wanted to compose and publish a set of mutually *unrelated* pieces (which their title, "24 Préludes," certainly suggests). It is hard to see how he could ~~he~~ have done it in a way that would defeat a determined unifier.

What is the motive behind the unifying theories? Devotees of Chopin may feel that his historical position alongside the great Germans is precarious. They may want to link him with one of them, namely Bach, over the heads of lesser men and women, and to protect him from the low status generally accorded in Western culture both to musical improvisation (Nettl 1998, 6–10) and to miniature forms (Kallberg 1992, 131–32). So they elevate the standing of his preludes by transforming them into a single, imposing composition with profound meaning and complex hidden structures.

Jeffrey Kallberg, in his study "Small 'Forms': In Defence of the Prelude," has convincingly refuted Eigeldinger's theory as "a willfully anachronistic viewpoint of the formal organisation of the preludes" endorsing "the view that smallness of form works to the aesthetic detriment of a musical work" (1992, 136). Like Kallberg I deny that large unified works are necessarily superior to miniatures, or that it is shameful to associate a composer of genius with an improvisatory convention. Further, I believe Chopin's preludes belong to a tradition of improvisation that has little connection with Bach's *WTC*. They are intended as single pieces, to be selected according to need or whim,

and played either as introductions or as free-standing miniatures. This will become clearer with the following examination of their precursors.

THE PRELUDE IN EUROPEAN ART MUSIC

One might expect that the Early Music movement would have researched and revived, by this time, any practice known to have existed in the 18th or early 19th century. Indeed, some attention has been paid to improvisation in the classic period. Robert Levin in the revised *New Grove* says, "Performers and composers of the Classical period perpetuated three types of Baroque improvisation: embellishment, free fantasies and cadenzas" (2001, 112). Two of these, embellishment and cadenzas, have been taken aboard by the Early Music movement with some enthusiasm. A singer who fails to embellish an aria in certain spots, or a violinist who plays a historically inappropriate cadenza in a concerto, is now likely to run into trouble with historically aware critics. Free fantasies, on the other hand, have not been widely revived. One reason may be that the Early Music movement is directed chiefly toward performing established works of great composers in a more authentic form, whereas if you improvise a free fantasy there is no great composer in sight.

Preluding falls somewhere between the categories. It can be called a specialized free fantasy, but at the same time it is attached to a notated composition. Few musicians today (Levin himself is a possible exception) would dare, in a public concert, to perform a prelude leading into a Mozart or Beethoven sonata, though there is plenty of evidence that this was often done in their time. Even a prelude to a song, if there is not one written by the composer (for instance, in Schubert's *Heidenröslein*), is never played in conventional recitals: the singer, unless endowed with absolute pitch, has to find her note by surreptitious means. Sandra Rosenblum, in her otherwise authoritative handbook *Performing Practices in Classic Piano Music*, has a section on "Improvised Ornamentation" (1988, 287–92), but she does not mention preluding. The most complete treatment is a study by Valerie Woodring Goertzen (1996), who also wrote about Clara Schumann's preludes in Bruno Nettle's symposium *In the Course of Performance* (1998). I am indebted to her work in parts of what follows.

Preluding before a notated composition had its origins in certain practical functions. There might be a need to warm up, especially for singers and players of wind instruments. The tuning of an instrument might have to be tested. For accompanied singing the singer had to be given the pitch and perhaps the tempo of the coming song. In Protestant churches the congrega-

tion might need to be reminded of the tune it was about to sing to a hymn or metrical psalm.

In the course of time these prosaic functions were seized by players as an opportunity to display technical facility, musical learning, or creativity. This could be called a second phase of preluding. Then, in a third phase, ideal models of the prelude were written down or even printed, and so became a fixed form of composition. In the nature of things we are generally able to study only the last phase, because the earlier ones are lost.

For example, the ancient use of the organ to accompany and then also introduce voices in certain phases of the Catholic mass or office led to the Italian toccata, and then to the still grander North German *präludium* of the 17th century. Players' trying out the strings of a lute or harpsichord before accompanying court dances evolved into the prelude that introduced a dance suite: Louis Couperin's unmeasured preludes retained much of the improvisatory character of the older tradition, but later composers systematized the genre. The prelude or giving out of hymn tunes was for a long time improvised in Germany, Denmark, and England, but again, master organists began to write down fully worked-out examples.

Remarkably, it was one man, Johann Sebastian Bach, who brought all three of these forms of prelude to their *non plus ultra*: respectively, the prelude and fugue, the prelude to a dance suite, and the chorale prelude. In his masterly specimens little sense of spontaneous creation remains. After they were introduced to the wider public at the beginning of 19th century they became models not so much for improvisation, but for other notated compositions.

However, Bach, despite his tendency to perfectionism, was also esteemed for his skill as an improviser. At Potsdam in 1747 he astonished witnesses by his ability to improvise a fugue on a subject provided on the spot by the King. His improvisation was admired as a display of learning and knowledge of harmony, not of direct inspiration, fancy, or freedom from restraint. Similarly, Bach's son Emanuel, in a chapter on improvisation in his *Essay* of 1753, was primarily concerned with offering the student a strong harmonic framework for any free fantasy, including a prelude (Bach [1753] 1949, 430–45). He does say that the free fantasy is exceptionally well suited to stirring and stilling the passions (439). But his instructions for students contain no trace of the idea that they should follow their fancy. On the contrary, he suggests a severely methodical approach to the playing of preludes.

THE ROMANTIC PRELUDE

A new esthetic of the prelude seems to have emerged in 1765 with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's entries "Prélude" and "Préluder" in the *Encyclopédie*. After listing the practical reasons for short preludes, he continued: "But on the organ and the harpsichord, the art of preluding is something more significant: it consists of composing and playing on the spot pieces charged with the most learned aspects of composition, in fugue, imitation, and harmony. To succeed [in this art] it is not enough to be a good composer, it is not enough to master the keyboard and to possess agile and well-exercised fingers. One must also abound in that fire of genius and that liveliness of spirit that allows one at once to find subjects most suitable for harmony and melodies most pleasing to the ear" (Rousseau 1765, 287; repeated in Rousseau 1768, 383).

Charles Burney was evidently influenced by these ideas when he described Emanuel Bach's playing in 1775: "he grew so animated and possessed, that he looked like one inspired" (1775, 2: 270–71). Johann Friedrich Reichardt also professed to be spellbound by Emanuel's improvisations. Burney, when in about 1800 he wrote the article "Prelude" for Abraham Rees's *Cyclopædia* (not published until 1819), paraphrased Rousseau's words, adding: "It is above all in preluding and giving way to the imagination, that great masters, exempt from the extreme subserviency to rules which the eyes of critics require in written music, display those talents of invention and execution which ravish all hearers far beyond the written labours of meditation and study" (1819). The power to improvise an inspired prelude was increasingly treated as a mark of genius, reserved for a select few. Other prominent reference works also followed Rousseau's definition (Lichtenthal 1826, 2:133; Castil-Blaze 1828, 192).

But amateurs still wanted to learn how to do it, since it was evidently an expected part of playing a keyboard instrument, especially in private gatherings. In about 1773 Tommaso Giordani, an Italian composer living in London, published *Preludes for the Harpsichord or Piano Forte in all the Keys Flat and Sharp* (i.e., minor and major). In fact, he covered only the 14 most commonly used keys, not all 24. The preludes vary from 8 to 15 measures, all but one in common time. I believe this collection was the first of its kind.

The purpose of Giordani's collection is stated on the title page: "N.B. This is intended as an assistance to Young Performers, as the beginning any Song or lesson without Touching in the Key has a very Awkward appearance & often disconcerts the Performer." The word "lesson" meant any keyboard piece, and was sometimes used synonymously with "sonata." The phrase "touching in

the key" suggests the word *toccare* in Giordani's native language, and there had always been a close connection between the prelude and the toccata.

It is extremely unlikely that Giordani was familiar with the *WTC*, which was not published until 1801, or indeed with any work by J. S. Bach (Tomita 2004, 1–6, 44–45 (Table 1.3)). His purpose, like Bach's, was didactic, but with a different goal. Bach's reason for using all the keys, shown in the title of the *WTC*, was to demonstrate the advantages of an improved form of tempered tuning in extending the tonal range of keyboard music. His preludes were not designed as introductions to any piece in the same key, since each was coupled to a fugue.

Giordani, by contrast, accepted the tonal limits of meantone temperament, which was still in normal use. But precluding had evidently become a conventional practice in performance, to the point where it was "awkward" not to do it. Students and amateurs would need a prelude in every likely key, since they might have to introduce a piece in any one of these keys and could not trust themselves to improvise.

The social background to Giordani's pieces was the drawing room rather than the public concert. This was a time when young women, especially, were encouraged to learn to play the harpsichord or piano as a social grace (Sadie 1990, 315–18). In London in 1773 the trend had evidently reached the point at which a publisher, Peter Welcker, thought it worth his while to issue a collection of preludes. Significantly, he chose a fashionable Italian musician to provide them.

It is reasonable to suppose that the preludes in Giordani's collection were representative of his own spontaneous precluding and that of contemporary professional performers, but simplified to the level of young students and amateurs. Each consists of a few bars of what could well have been the beginning of a sonata movement, with some flourishes displaying technical virtuosity, but further exposition is soon cut off by a cadence in the tonic key (see Figure 19.1). Of course, it is likely that the printed versions are more polished and more carefully corrected than a true improvisation, but the general flavor and character are no doubt preserved. The preludes are rather routine in character: not much "fancy" is detectable at this stage.

This publication had dozens of successors—first in London, then in other European cities. Giordani himself brought out a second set of *Fourteen Preludes or Capriccios and Eight Cadences* [Cadenzas] for the *Piano Forte*, Harpsichord, Harp, or Organ in about 1785. The preludes cover the same 14 keys, but this time they are longer, unmeasured, and technically more advanced.

Giordani, c.1773

FIGURE 19.1. Number 12 of Tommaso Giordani's *Preludes for the Harpsichord or Piano Forte in All the Keys Flat and Sharp* (London: Welcker, [1773]).

some, headed "Arpeggio," are made up entirely of arpeggiated chords, a type found in many of these collections.

The following year Muzio Clementi issued a curious publication called *Clementi's Musical Characteristics: or A Collection of Preludes and Cadences for the Harpsichord or Piano Forte Composed in the Style of Haydn, Kozeluch, Mozart, Sterkel, Vanhal and The Author*. The purpose of this work has been disputed. Eva Badura-Skoda (1970) has suggested a partly satirical purpose, a premise questioned by Leon Plantinga (1977, 53–67). Clementi is known to have witnessed Mozart's prelude at a famous contest between the two arranged in Vienna by Emperor Joseph II in 1781.

Clementi was to become a towering figure in the musical world; he was based in London but conducted extended tours around Europe. He was a piano manufacturer, publisher, and teacher as well as a pianist and composer. His *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte* (1801) contained an anthology of short pieces he called lessons, many of them originally written for other media and now arranged for piano. In terms of technical demands they range from easy to intermediate, but they are grouped by key: the keys range from three flats to four sharps. Each group is preceded by a short prelude in the same key, with the implication that the prelude is suitable to introduce any of the "lessons" in the group. Figure 19.2 is a very simple prelude followed by an arrangement of a Corelli allemanda, of which the first two measures are given here. Clementi studied J.S. Bach and owned a manuscript copy of the *WTC*, part 2 (Tomita 2004, 71–82), and it is possible that the shape of the arpeggiation (though in itself commonplace) was suggested by Prelude No. 1 from *WTC*, part 1.

Clementi's piano tutor was hugely influential, running to many editions in at least five languages. The fifth London edition of 1811 had an appendix that added more demanding pieces, ranging over all 24 keys, with new preludes, some of them much more substantial. Figure 19.3 is one of three preludes in G major. Here, any influence of Bach has clearly vanished. What we do find, though, is a degree of "fancy," which to the listener takes the form of surprise. The main aesthetic of the piece is one of freedom from constraint, suggesting that the player is following his inclination wherever it takes him, provided it leads him back to the main key in the end. Clementi's preludes are always barred in common time, though he often added pauses, *ritardandi*, *accelerandi*, and changes of tempo.

Two other expatriates in London, August Friedrich Christopher Kollman and Jan Ladislav Dussek, published sets of sonatas preceded by rather elaborate preludes in about 1792 and 1795, respectively (discussed in Goertzen 1996,

Clementi, 1801

Prelude in D minor by M.C.

sempre legato

5

Allemanda, by CORELLI

9

FIGURE 19.2. A prelude from Clementi's *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte* (London: Clementi, 1801), with the first two bars of the Corelli allemanda it was designed to introduce, as arranged by Clementi. The titles are as Clementi printed them.

315, 325). Another Londoner of Italian background, Philip Anthony Corri, in 1810 published *L'anima di musica: An Original Treatise on Piano Playing*, with a section on prelude and over 200 "progressive preludes," later issued separately as *Original System of Preluding*. In it he said, "In the performance of preludes, all formality or precision of time must be avoided: they must appear to be the birth of the moment, the effusion of the fancy: for this reason it may be observed, that the measure of time is not always marked in preludes" (1810, 84). This is indeed the case in an 1818 collection by Clementi's Anglo-German pupil John Baptist Cramer, entitled *Twenty-Six Preludes or Short Introductions in the Principal Major and Minor Keys for the Piano Forte*.

In the German-speaking lands at this time, no pianist was more famous

Clementi, 1811

FIGURE 19.3. A prelude from the appendix to the fifth edition of Clementi's *Introduction* (London, 1811): a more self-contained piece, with some elements of "fancy."

than Mozart's Czech pupil Johann Nepomuk Hummel. There are many accounts of his astonishing improvisations (Goertzen 1996, 305 n. 21). Like Clementi he decided to provide models for students, and to profit by them. He published a set of preludes in all 24 keys in the Vienna periodical *Répertoire de musique pour les dames* (1814), which were later reprinted in many cities. They are short and they follow standard harmonic progressions, but

they are highly unpredictable in their affective character; some have textural contrast, and others are continuous. The dynamics are also unstandardized; some end with loud chords, others with a soft and somber cadence. In short, the aesthetic of surprise is again dominant. Figure 19.4 is one of the more exciting specimens.

Beethoven's pupil Ferdinand Ries published *Quarante préludes pour le piano-forte en plusieurs tons majeurs et mineurs* at Vienna in about 1818. The title page says they are to serve as an introduction to all kinds of movement. There is a telling detail. Although the preludes are in no particular order, they are carefully indexed by key, showing that one of their main purposes was

Hummel, 1814

FIGURE 19.4. One of the more exciting short preludes from the 24 that Hummel published in the publication *Répertoire de musique pour les dames* (2. Année, cahier 9) at Vienna in 1814. This example is taken from a later reprint, *Preludes dans tous les 24 tons*, Op. 67 (Hamburg: A. Cranz, [1838]).

still a practical one: to provide suitable introductions in any key that might be wanted. Several of these give a truly improvisatory effect; they are crafted to sound like someone trying out the keyboard and freely following up an idea. Most begin with a distinct motive, which then dissolves into passage work, often reaching an emotional climax, followed by material leading quickly to the cadence. Figure 19.5 is one specimen. Below it appears the beginning of a piece by Ries's master that it might have been designed to introduce.

Carl Czerny, another famous virtuoso pianist and Beethoven pupil, offered the first comprehensive treatment of piano improvisation, published in German, English, and French as Op. 200 in 1829. In it he stated categorically that "the performer should become accustomed to improvising a prelude each time and before each piece that he studies or plays," and he repeated this instruction in his *Piano School* of 1839, so there can be little doubt that the practice was still customary in the year when Chopin's preludes were published (Czerny 1829, 1839, 3: 116–23).

Of the many other sets of preludes in all the keys that appeared between 1820 and 1839, an especially significant one is that of the French pianist Frédéric Kalkbrenner—if only because he was praised by Chopin, who had few kind words to say about his contemporaries. His collection was called *Twenty-Four Preludes for the Piano Forte, in All the Major and Minor Keys, being an Introduction to the Art of Preluding*, published at Paris, London, and Leipzig in 1827. The keys are in rising chromatic order, as in the *WTC*. Figure 19.6 shows the beginning of No. 3, in D flat major (the complete prelude is reproduced in facsimile in Goertzen 1996, 328–29). The whole piece is 40 measures long and, as Goertzen points out, comes closer to a finished character piece than a model for improvisation. But, like the others in the set, it is unpredictable in form. After a modulation to the dominant key, a second theme is heard (Figure 19.7), in an ascending sequence that begins to telescope and modulate through various keys; it returns in the tonic and the modulations become more remote. A virtuosic coda (Figure 19.8) preserves another tradition of the improvised prelude.

This piece, especially its final cadence, brings Chopin directly to mind, and we are getting very close to him now. Chopin's preludes, even more than Kalkbrenner's, are extraordinarily varied in character and weight. One is an impetuous flourish, another a soulful lament; one a demure 16-bar waltz, another a finished song without words. Robert Wangermée in 1950 went so far as to say that "they are preludes to nothing, and their improvisatory character is only affected, for they are a stylization of an ideal of improvisation which had already effectively ceased to be practiced" (Wangermée 1950, 242).

The image displays a musical score for a prelude in F minor. The score is divided into four systems. The first system is marked 'Andantino' and 'p'. The second system is marked 'f'. The third system is marked 'p' and 'pp'. The fourth system is marked 'Allegro' and 'p'. The score is in F minor and 3/4 time. The first system is marked 'Andantino' and 'p'. The second system is marked 'f'. The third system is marked 'p' and 'pp'. The fourth system is marked 'Allegro' and 'p'. The score is in F minor and 3/4 time.

FIGURE 19.5. A prelude in F minor from Ries's *Quarante préludes pour le piano-forte en plusieurs tons majeurs et mineurs* (Vienna, [c.1818]). This is followed by the first two measures of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2, no. 1 (1795), which Ries's prelude might well have been designed to introduce.

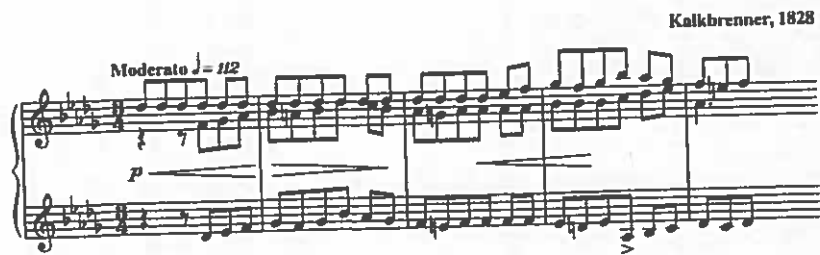


FIGURE 19.6. Kalkbrenner's preludes approach Chopin's in length and complexity. This is the opening of No. 3 in D flat major from his *Twenty-four Preludes for the Piano Forte, in All the Major and Minor Keys*, Op. 88 (Paris, London, and Leipzig, [1827]).

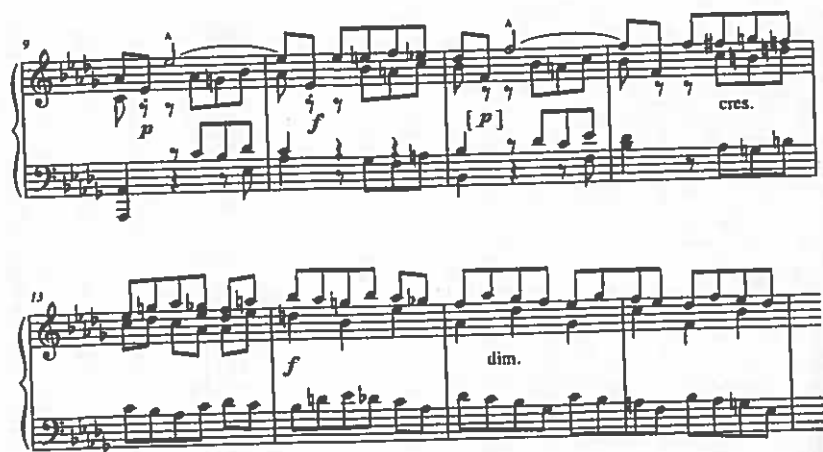


FIGURE 19.7. Measures 9–16 of No. 3 from Kalkbrenner's *Twenty-four Preludes for the Piano Forte, in All the Major and Minor Keys*, Op. 88 (Paris, London, and Leipzig, [1827]).



FIGURE 19.8. The conclusion of No. 3 from Kalkbrenner's *Twenty-four Preludes for the Piano Forte, in All the Major and Minor Keys*, Op. 88 (Paris, London, and Leipzig, [1827]).

Yet any musician of 1839 seeing a set of preludes in all the keys could not have failed to connect them with that practice, and both Chopin and his publishers must have been well aware of that fact. He was himself highly reputed as an improviser (Fétis and Moscheles 1840, 73). Kallberg points out that he often improvised preludes, and suggests that he may have used Op. 28, No. 8 in F# minor as an introduction to his Impromptu in F# major, Op. 36, at Glasgow in 1848 (Kallberg 1992, 136–37). An English pianist, Henry Rogers, in 1850 played Chopin's Tarantella preceded by what a reviewer called “a clever and peculiar, rather than interesting, prelude by the same composer” (*Musical World* 25: 308)—presumably No. 17 in A flat, the key of the Tarantella. Liszt, reviewing an 1841 concert in which Chopin played a few preludes from Op. 28, felt it necessary to point out that they were not just introductory pieces, as the title would suggest, but were “compositions of an order entirely apart” (*Revue et gazette musicale* 8: 246).

The idea of preluding, then, was by no means obsolete. But as Goertzen found, it began to decline after about 1840 (Goertzen 1996, 332–37). As critical attitudes moved decisively in the direction of canonization, pianists grew afraid to alter or add to the written notes of the masters, and even Franz Liszt apologized for doing so. We have hardly moved away from that position

today. That is why it is healthy to remind ourselves of the historical context in which Chopin created his Op. 28.

The one prelude in Chopin's collection that clearly retains the impression of unpremeditated and fanciful improvisation is No. 2 in A minor. Very unusually for a published prelude, it begins in ambiguous tonality (Figure 19.9), continues with deepening mystery, and establishes its home key of A minor only at the final cadence.

It is obvious that Chopin's preludes transcended their predecessors in individuality and imaginative power. They were not solely models for improvised introductions. They were also artistic miniatures in their own right. Schumann, perhaps slightly baffled by their unusual character, called them "sketches, beginnings of etudes, or, so to speak, ruins, solitary eagle's wings, a wild and colourful motley of pieces" (*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 11: 163). But it can hardly be doubted that they were intended as contributions to a familiar tradition, which they would transcend. Others before Chopin, notably Kalkbrenner, had taken steps to wean the prelude from its introductory function and make it work also as an independent miniature. It was Chopin who completed that process. The earlier printed sets, after all, had been devised for amateurs, whereas the Rousseau ideal for the prelude required the "fire of genius." Paradoxically, once that quality had been displayed in printed form in Chopin's preludes, it removed them from the realm of improvisation

Chopin, 1839



FIGURE 19.9. The opening of No. 2 of Chopin's 24 *Préludes*, Op. 39.

and brought them quickly into the fixed canon of piano music, where Bach's were already entrenched.

There is no question that Chopin admired Bach; he even had a copy of the *WTC* with him on Majorca when he was working on his preludes (Eigeldinger 1988, 174). Nevertheless, there is no perceptible link or resemblance between the two works. They are analogous only in the fact that each sums up a tradition of improvised preluding and completes its transformation into a form of premeditated composition that became a model for others. The specific tradition that lay behind Chopin's preludes was quite distinct from the one behind Bach's. It was the fanciful improvised introduction, designed to set the scene and mood for an equally romantic transmission of a work of genius.

The manner of improvised preluding in the early 19th century cannot be exactly recovered, even if it were desirable to attempt such a thing. We have only printed examples, which were not in themselves improvised and were likely to be more structured and polished, and probably also more conservative, than the practice they claimed to represent. Yet, after all, the difference may be less than it appears (see, for instance, Nettl 1998, 4–6). We have learned from two conferences on improvisation, covering cultures from all over the world, that the practice itself is typically a product of long and careful preparation, and that its aura of spontaneous creation may be more an affect or a symbol than a literal reality.

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