

Interpreting Chopin - The Preludes, Op.28

by Angela Lear

Chopin's modest choice of title, Preludes, for his remarkable set of twenty-four miniature masterpieces has often prompted the question, "Preludes to what?" Historically, preludes for the keyboard appeared as early as the 15th century in the organ tablatures from Germany. The 'prelude' evolved from a variety of compositions related to the period and nationality of the composer. These ranged from relatively basic compositions of a cadentially harmonic design or improvisatory nature and those intended to serve as a preparation to the audience for compositions that followed, to extended highly decorated preludes displaying the virtuosity of the performer.

The 'independent' short keyboard Prelude had been written by Bach, his Little Preludes, and later in the early 19th-century there were many similarly composed collections, including; Chaulieu's 24 Little Preludes (early 1820's), Hummel's Vorspiele Op.67 (1818), and those of Czerny, Kalkbrenner, Cramer, Clementi, Szymanowska, Moscheles, etc.. Chopin would no doubt have been familiar with many of these compositions. It is also relevant to mention Klengel's 1829 performance of his own Canons and Fugues in all Major and Minor Keys which drew Chopin's attention at the time.

It was not unusual for Chopin to take from existing forms those elements, fundamental characteristics and genre titles he required in order to create compositions of supreme originality. His innovative genius knew no bounds and as the master-craftsman he idealised each genre to make it entirely his own unique art form - and the Preludes are no exception. He had previously composed an 'independent' Prelude in Ab major (dating from 1834 and published posthumously in 1918: Kobylanska K.1231-2). Later in 1841 he composed the extended improvisatory Prelude in C# minor, Op.45, published by Schlesinger that year. Chopin's reverence for the compositions of Bach and Mozart, in preference to the overtly 'virtuosic' and Romantic music written by his contemporaries, cannot be overstated. His art was essentially remote from the Romantic movement. "... 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." (J.-J.Eigeldinger:Chopin Studies). Chopin had a life-long devotion to the music of Bach, which had a powerful influence on him. This fact is particularly of relevance in discussing Chopin's Preludes as there are affinities beyond the connection of tonal design of Bach's celebrated '48', The Well-Tempered Klavier. Bach's scores of the '48', comprising of Preludes and Fugues (*two of each in all of the major and minor tonalities), accompanied Chopin to Majorca, where he completed work on his Op.28 for publication in January 1839. Chopin had also, with all modesty, undertaken the task of correcting Bach's scores in the Parisian edition 'not only the mistakes made by the engraver, but those which are backed by the authority of people who are supposed to understand Bach'.

Chopin's Preludes range in duration from just half a minute to a variable five-six minutes for the extended Nocturne-like No.15 in Db major - spuriously entitled Raindrop claiming to depict remorseless drips on the roof of Valldemosa.

Chopin's music is not programmatic and he would have abhorred the array of 'descriptive' titles that have been imposed on some of his compositions. Von Bülow perceived the 4th Prelude as 'Suffocation', the 10th as 'The Night Moth' and, even more amusingly, the 9th as a 'Vision' in which "...Chopin has the conviction that he has lost his power of expression. With the determination to discover whether his brain can still originate ideas, he strikes his head with a hammer... one can hear the blood trickle..". Alfred Cortot's 'descriptions' were, fortunately, of a more artistic nature at least!

Although the average length of each Prelude approximates a mere two minutes, their brevity in no way suggests any diminution of expressive power. These miniature masterpieces are not merely 'a gathering together' of 24 Sketches, an Album Leaf, petite morceaux, nor "... crumbs from the rich table of the Etudes". Each Prelude is, in its perfection of form, the distillation of a musical idea and thought, intrinsically complete and concise - absolutely appropriate to their unique character. They are inspired gems that can be performed in small selected groups as they were by Chopin, reflecting the customs of the day, or as an astonishing cumulative experience performed in their entirety - a presentation that

seems to be the preferred option of modern-day pianists. My former teacher Louis Kentner perceived the placement of the Db major Prelude No.15 as a 'central movement' in the cycle - creating a welcome oasis of calm before the remaining Preludes proceed to their dramatic close.

As with Bach, the tonal sequences obviously proved no restriction to creative inspiration. The sheer contrast, originality and diversity of style and mood contained in this cycle of 'tone-poems' is stunning and Chopin takes us through the whole gamut of expression. For the interpreter the Preludes present a formidable challenge. Apart from the essential prerequisites of a highly developed technique, far rarer qualities of insight and artistry are demanded by Chopin's interpreters - and 'musical intelligence' should also be mentioned. Studies of Chopin's autograph mss and draft copies reveal the meticulous care and attention to detail he applied to his scores. He would endeavour to ensure that the definite version he eventually decided on should prevail. A fact somewhat contrary to the views we are encouraged to believe from some editors and publishers.

From studies of the draft copy mss it is interesting to note that Chopin originally gave the F# major Prelude a *lento ma non troppo* tempo indication in 6/8 time, but later altered this to a simple *lento* in 6/4 time to best express the meditative character of this exquisite 'reverie'. To cite another example, the B minor Prelude tempo was altered from *largo* to *lento assai* - although it is rare indeed to witness Chopin's given tempos in performance. Chopin gave considerable thought to final score markings and would obliterate rejected score details to an extreme degree. Pianists should not disregard the composer's precise intentions in favour of 'personal preferences' to facilitate interpretative or technical difficulties. Chopin's given performance instructions are far easier to ignore than to achieve and it should not need saying that his scores are not merely sheets of graph-paper on which 'free for all' designs can be drawn by interpreters.

It is sadly all too common to hear his favoured *sotto voce* indications 'replaced' with erroneous *mezzo forte-forte* dynamics, e.g. in the amazing Finale from the *Sonata funebre*, Op.35. A further common execution is to give the wrong effect of triple-time in the 2/8 duple-time measures of the first Prelude in C major. Generally this is due to the misplaced over-emphasis of R.H. thumb note entries with insufficient regard to the L.H. bass note on which the first 'down beat' phrases actually begin. It is essential to achieve the correct tonal balance and co-ordination of the hands, with careful listening to maintain the 2/8 pulse and rhythms, including the syncopated voicing. The stylised chordal texture of this Prelude, without a sustained melodic line, requires very sparing use of the sustaining pedal too, so that the clarity of the triplets and quintuplets are not submerged. Chopin's dynamics also need to be finely judged. This Prelude should not appear as a 'shot from a gun' with a *forte* blast, and the 2/8 measures must be established from the outset at Bar 1. There should also be no *rallentando* at the end and the decrease in tone is a matter of touch. I was intrigued to read Kleczynski's recommendation that this Prelude should be played twice (!) "...with less haste the first time, but greater haste subsequently". Advice that would have Chopin turning in his grave, knowing that any deviations to his texts were so abhorrent to him, even from his fervent admirer Liszt. " [Chopin].. art which asks only to be allowed to rely on its own virtues in order to manifest the enduring quality with which its creator has endowed it." (Arthur Hedley: 'Chopin, The Man') Each of the twenty-four Preludes is, of course, deserving of a thorough discussion, but would exceed the space available for this article. (Angela Lear's double-CD album, Vol.5 in 'The Original Chopin' series features the 24 Preludes, Op.28, and includes a 'gratis' CD presented as a comprehensive talk on all of the Preludes in addition to comparative interpretations illustrated and discussed. For details please see below.)

The music itself is the technique that Chopin demands of his interpreters. Art such as his, expressed so manifestly in the Op.28 Preludes can be all too easily eclipsed. To capture and communicate the individual character of each of the Preludes is the ultimate challenge to the interpreter. Not only is a wide dynamic range specified, from the most delicate *leggierissimo* to a fully-rounded and passionate *fortissimo*, but every shade of the myriad varieties of tonal colour and nuance. The widely contrasted moods of the Preludes have to be seized instantly; from the disturbing darkness of No.2, the deeply poetic character of No.6, the amazing atmosphere of No.8, the joyful elegance of No.11, the stormy No.12, the virtuosic bravura of No.16, the bold 'recitativo' stylisation of No.18, the sublime (and extremely

difficult) No.19, the enchanted world of No.23 - to the closing passionately stormy mood of No.24 - each Prelude is unique.

Last, but by no means least, interpreting Chopin requires a simplicity from the performer: an approach far removed from the violet-scented trivialising sentimentality that substitutes Chopin's subtle rubato with those excessive (and unwritten) tempo changes. Exaggerated dynamics, usually supported by a heavily applied sustaining pedal, aid the 'virtuosic' over-dramatising performances which are an antithesis of Chopin's aesthetic. These, and other misrepresentations, serve only to subvert Chopin's intentions. "A great interpretation is never 'applied' from without, it always emerges from within. The paradox of a successful performance is that it does not really express the music at all - the music expresses it". [Alan Walker: Chopin and Musical Structure]

About the Author

Angela Lear studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Professor Guy Jonson (Senior Piano Professor and former pupil of Cortot). As the result of winning a Gold Medal for her performance of Ravel's 'Miroirs' she has studied with Nadia Boulanger.

Louis Kentner introduced her to the importance of studying Chopin's autograph manuscripts and original sources due to the various discrepancies contained in many edited publications, which eventually became her life-long devotion.

Ms. Lear has toured the U.K. and abroad extensively with her illuminating lecture-recitals on Chopin. She has performed at major concert venues worldwide. Her CD series, 'The Original Chopin', has received critical acclaim:

"... Chopin held strong views about the performance of his music, and the directions he left in his manuscripts are so specific that it's astonishing how far modern performance practice has departed from his stated intentions. Most pianists over-dramatise his music, playing too loudly and too fast, with scant attention to phrasing and dynamics – and with inappropriate pedalling.

... Chopin experts have long sought to remedy the situation and to recapture the true style of playing his music – among them Angela Lear.

... her Chopin, alongside other performances, even by some of the most respected pianists, is a revelation ... Hear what Chopin really intended." [BBC Music Magazine]

For details of this artist, reviews listing and Real Time Audio tracks from her Chopin CD series, please visit her website at www.angelalear.com

** Bach's sequence is based on the cycle of monotonicity, ascending chromatically from C major-C minor to C# major et seq., whereas Chopin chose the duality of the harmonic series of 5ths: beginning with C major and then to the Relative Minor 'A', closing with D minor. The tonal pattern also adopted by Hummel.*

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