

ERSATZ IMPROVISATION: CHOPIN'S OPUS 28 AND THE PUBLISHED PRELUDE COLLECTION¹

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AN 1825 REVIEW IN *THE HARMONICON* gave lavish praise to a new collection of preludes by T. A. Rawlings. They are «beyond compare», the reviewer writes, «the best we have ever seen; there is a spontaneousness in their character which will gain for the performer, — if he play them accurately by memory, and freely, — all the credit of unpremeditated effusion»². Clearly, the reviewer valued an aesthetic in these works indebted to the prelude's long history as an improvised introduction to a keyboard piece. To be sure, so did many an amateur pianist. Publications by Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Frédéric Kalkbrenner, Joseph Kessler, Johann Baptist Cramer, Henri Herz, and many others contain short pieces in a variety of keys and each was — whether explicitly or implicitly — intended for use by amateurs or students. Thanks to such prelude collections, amateurs could feign an improvised introduction to a performance, gaining a musical cachet otherwise out of reach.

By situating Chopin's own foray into prelude composition in relation to both the improvised prelude and the published prelude collection, I hope to suggest a context of listening less than fully apparent to modern audiences. Indeed, the legacy of Chopin's *Préludes* is clearer to us than their heritage. In the 170 odd years since Op. 28's publication, collections of evocative miniatures composed by the likes of Aleksandr Skryabin, Karol Szymanowski, and Claude Debussy have confirmed for modern audiences the lasting status of the prelude as a genre of composition. Today, most pianists perform Op. 28 as a complete cycle of twenty-four preludes. Listeners expect to hear the preludes in order and are accustomed to a structure that unites the twenty-four pieces. But is this modern conception of the prelude genre also how Chopin and his contemporaries heard Op. 28?

¹. I am grateful to Barbara Milewski, Richard Eldridge, David Kasunic, and Dietmar Friesenegger for insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Thanks also to Marie Rousseau and Dietmar Friesenegger for their assistance with and suggestions concerning the French and German translations respectively.

². Anonymous review of 'Preludes for the Piano-Forte, in the keys most generally used, major and minor, composed by T. A. Rawlings', in: *The Harmonicon*, III/36 (December 1825), p. 231.

In short: no. A cyclic performance of the preludes, as Jeffrey Kallberg has cogently argued, would have been unlikely in Chopin's time. Modern performance practice is indebted to a notion of 'structural form', which, however, in Chopin's time had not yet assumed a clear predominance over 'generic form'. Audiences tended to understand 'form' as closely related to 'genre' or 'type', rather than as a principle of long-range structural listening. It seems, argues Kallberg, that Chopin and his contemporaries heard the *Préludes* individually, in small groups, or as introductions to other works, as Chopin himself performed them³. For one, non-cyclic performances let the individual qualities of each prelude sink in — qualities that are easily overshadowed if a performer focuses on connecting and integrating the entire collection. But I wish to ask further what did Chopin's audiences hear when they so listened; that is, what constituted the prelude genre, as understood by 1839 audiences?

Three elements need further elucidation and connection: the tradition of improvising preludes stretching back to the eighteenth century and before; the prelude collections contemporaneous with Chopin's work in the genre; and Chopin's own Op. 28⁴. While the prelude as a type of 'artistic' composition is often understood to have originated with Chopin, his own conception of the genre is indebted to changes in the contemporaneous publication and consumption of preludes. An examination of how and why preludes came to be written down, rather than solely improvised, lays the background for an analysis of Chopin's Op. 28 no. 8 in F# minor. Here, I argue elements of the musical language work to reclaim the improvisational immediacy seemingly precluded by the textual nature of a published prelude.

THE PRELUDE: A GENRE IN TRANSITION FROM IMPROVISATION TO COMPOSITION

Historically, the prelude genre and improvisation were closely aligned. In eighteenth-century France, 'to prelude' could be used interchangeably with 'to improvise', even if the

³. KALLBERG, Jeffrey. *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 140–145.

⁴. In asking about the prelude genre as understood by Chopin's contemporaries, I intend to move away from a common line of inquiry, namely the influence of Bach's preludes and fugues on Chopin. Few who have argued for the *Well-Tempered Clavier's* influence on the *Préludes* have been able to explain why Chopin published the *Préludes* without some sort of following piece. Generically, this is a crucial change, and one whose implications become clearer when Op. 28 is viewed in light of the many prelude collections published around this time. Of course, I do not mean to deny a possible influence of Bach's style or approach on Chopin (indeed, Chopin knew the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and had it with him while working on many of the preludes). For the Bach account, see EIGELDINGER, Jean-Jacques. 'Twenty-four Preludes Op. 28: Genre, Structure, and Significance', in: *Chopin Studies*, edited by Jim Samson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 167–193. See also SAMSON, Jim. *Chopin*, New York, Schirmer Books, 1997 (Master musicians series), pp. 157–158.

'preluding' was not intended as an introduction to a piece⁵. When used in the narrower sense, that is, as an introduction to a featured composition, the pianist's extemporaneous introduction would take into consideration the piece to be performed and the audience in attendance. In an early era of piano manufacturing, during which the playing qualities of instruments varied considerably, preluding had a practical application: it allowed the performer to test the instrument before beginning the piece itself. Preluding also let the pianist warm up with less technically demanding material and called the audience's attention to the beginning of the performance⁶. Being able to prelude was considered, as Carl Czerny notes, «akin to a crown of distinction» for a pianist, and was especially important in private circles, where the pianist was obliged to establish a more personal connection with the audience⁷.

Improvised preluding required a comprehensive knowledge of music — technical prowess in execution undergirded by fluency in harmony. Years of training preceded one's first improvisation, of which a prelude is perhaps an ideal example, even for the illustrious piano virtuoso Johann Nepomuk Hummel. When writing on improvisation in his *Ausführliche theoretisch-practische Anweisung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel*, he narrates his own pianistic development and its culmination in his current improvisatory abilities. He acknowledges that amateurs need not receive such a long education, but they nevertheless can improvise only «after good instruction in all theoretical and practical fundamentals, [and] have, in their playing, considerably practiced and studied what concerns skill, security, taste, and expression, which they have considerably practiced and trained»⁸.

While such amateurs would have been Hummel's ideal audience, his book also targets an audience lacking in these skills:

The necessary talents and skill assumed here, like in this Chapter [on improvisation] overall, has the origin of its malady mostly in the circumstance that the amateur, with no sheet music before him, rarely retains sufficient composure and calm needed to persistently fix his excited powers on one point and to use these powers for that point. Second, because he does not

⁵ WANGERMÉE, Robert. 'L'Improvisation pianistique au début du XIX^e siècle', in: *Miscellanea Musicologica Floris van der Mueren*, Ghent, L. van Melle, 1950, pp. 235. For an example of such usage see the discussion of preluding and the written prelude in BEMETZRIEDER, Anton. *Leçons de clavecin et principes d'harmonie*, Paris, Bluet, 1771, pp. 300-313.

⁶ WOODRING GOERTZEN, Valerie. 'By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th- and Early 19th-Century Pianists', in: *The Journal of Musicology*, XIV/3 (Summer 1996), pp. 304.

⁷ CZERNY, Carl. *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte: Opus 200*, translated by Alice L. Mitchell, New York, Longman, 1983 (Longman music series), p. 6.

⁸ HUMMEL, Johann Nepomuk. *Ausführliche theoretisch-practische Anweisung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel: vom ersten Elementar-Unterrichte an bis zur vollkommensten Ausbildung*, Vienna, Tobias Haslinger, [1830 ca.], pp. 462-463: «nach gutem Unterricht in allem theoretisch- und praktisch- Elementarischen, sich im Spiele, was Fertigkeit, Sicherheit, Geschmack und Ausdruck betrifft, beträchtlich geübt und ausgebildet haben».

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yet sufficiently possess, and cannot possess, the skill and fluency in harmonic execution and harmonic continuation, in order to notice, without being disrupted or halted, what in this regard can be done: how to begin with such a musical idea, with such a melody. Then, in both cases, the imaginative powers break off and the memory is scattered⁹.

While printed music allowed the amateur to play without knowledge of a piece's construction, this reliance makes learning to improvise all the more difficult; weaning the student from the written notes was an especially steep challenge in teaching a student to improvise. Hummel, after frankly setting out the challenges faced by amateur improvisers, comments on the shift occurring within musical practice towards a notated tradition:

I close by recommending free improvisation in general and in every respectable form to all those for whom [music] is not merely a matter of entertainment and practical ability, but also, even, principally one of spirit [Geist] and meaning in their art. This recommendation, to be sure, has never been so urgent as now, because the number of people whose interest belong to the former category and not to the latter has never been so great¹⁰.

For a chapter that made improvisation seem impossible for all but the most talented, this is a strikingly ambivalent conclusion. Hummel recognizes that improvisation is largely beyond the reach of his audience, but nonetheless believes steadfastly in the importance of the deeper musical knowledge of which improvisation is proof. Now more than ever, musical fluency — the kind that lets people communicate the meaning and spirit of printed notes — is threatened by sheet-music dependent dilettantes.

In part, Hummel references a shift occurring across Europe, in which not only did musical culture become accessible to a narrow, yet growing, population outside the ruling class, but in which there arose «new means of producing and distributing

⁹. *Ibidem*, p. 464: «Die nötigen Talente und Fertigkeiten hier, wie in diesen Kapitel überall, vorausgesetzt — hat dies Übel seinen Ursprung meistens darin, dass der Liebhaber, hat er keine Noten vor sich, selten genugsame [*sic*] Fassung und Ruhe behält, um seine aufgeregten Kräfte auf Einen Punkt beharrlich zu fixieren und für ihn zu verwenden; und zweitens, weil er vor Gewandtheit und Geläufigkeit in harmonischer Fort- und Ausführung noch nicht genug besitzt, und besitzen kann, um schnell, und ohne gestört oder aufgehalten zu werden, zu bemerken, was in solcher Hinsicht sich mit einer solchen musikalischen Idee, mit solch einer Melodie, anfangen lässt — wo dann freilich, in beiden Fällen, die Einbildungskraft abspringt und das Gedächtnis zerstreuet wird».

¹⁰. Translation after WOODRING GOERTZEN, Valerie. *Op. cit.* (see note 6), p. 305. «Ich schliesse mit einer Empfehlung des freien Phantasierens überhaupt und in jeder achtbaren Form an Alle, denen es nicht blos um Unterhaltung und um Geschicklichkeit im Praktischen, sondern auch, ja vornehmlich, um den Geist und Sinn in ihrer Kunst zu thun ist: diese Empfehlung aber ist nie so dringend gewesen, als jetzt, weil es deren, die nur jene, nicht diese beabsichtigen, nie so Viele als jetzt gegeben hat».

cultural goods — pianos, printed music, journals, systems of education and opinion — on a mass and international scale», at the center of which was the piano¹¹. In France, on the other hand, in life under the July Monarchy «men responsible for public affairs in a parliamentary system had to be eloquent, but they also had to learn how to establish institutions, organize elections, campaign for office, and regulate the press»¹². Wealth and power flowed from work and investment so the aristocratic privilege of extensive leisure time diminished. As Steven Kale remarks, «[t]he modern world was slowly killing the amateur, the *homme non-spécialisé*, whose extinction signaled the erosion of a way of life founded on pure sociability and reflection rather than professional responsibility»¹³.

For amateurs who wanted to learn about musical 'aesthetics' but lived busy lives, François-Joseph Fétis's 1830 *La Musique mise à la portée du tout le monde* was the perfect book. Fétis did not intend to give practical instruction in performance or harmony, but wanted his readers to become competent listeners and conversationalists about music despite conflicting demands on their time:

But time is precisely that which we have the least at command, in the course of life, especially in the present state of civilization. Obligated to learn a multitude of things, we can give but very slight attention to each, and we are compelled to select those that will be most useful in the business of life. The arts, considered as recreations, or sources of pleasure, are among those objects, with which, in general, we become acquainted only as we pass along through life, and of which everyone thinks himself a competent judge by nature and without study; not that one would not like to have correct ideas concerning them, provided it cost us no more labor to obtain them, than it does to keep up with the politics of the day by reading the newspaper. But where is the book that meets this want¹⁴?

Indeed, Fétis's book sold well, and went into several pirated editions before being reprinted, showing that the amateur market had substantial buying power and a hunger for «correct ideas» concerning the arts. Even before these important socio-economic changes

¹¹. PARAKILAS, James — WHEELOCK, Gretchen A. '1770s to 1820s: The Piano Revolution in the Age of Revolutions', in: *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano*, edited by James Parakilas et al., Foreword by Noah Adams, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 1999, p. 93.

¹². KALE, Steven. *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848*, Baltimore (MD), The John Hopkins University Press, 2004, p. 186. Kale is summarizing Charles de Rémusat's worries about the decline of salons during the 1830s and 1840s.

¹³. *Ibidem*, p. 174.

¹⁴. FÉTIS, François-Joseph. *Music Explained to the World, or, How to Understand Music and Enjoy Its Performance*, English translation by Samuel Eliot and Luther Cushing, Boston, B. Perkins, 1842, pp. xii–xiii.

assumed their full force, André Grétry in 1801 published a method for learning to prelude in little time, in which he suggests that with command of only tonic and dominant chords, one is well on the way to preluding¹⁵.

Against this background, preluding manuals offered an initiation into not only the improvised prelude, but also the harmonic groundwork necessary for improvisation. Published material related to preludes and preluding can be heuristically divided into three broad and permeable groups: 1) simplified harmony manuals that make some attempt to apply the harmonic lessons on the piano and 2) those that go further in their keyboard application by combining figuration patterns with chord progressions¹⁶. A third group does not consist of manuals at all, but instead of fully composed prelude collections. These three types of publication co-existed. While not exhaustive of the wealth of material published during this period, the APPENDIX documents the various publications on which I base these groupings.

The first type of manual is exemplified by August Friedrich Kollmann's *An Introduction to the Art of Preluding and Extemporizing*. Kollmann leads students through successive exercises: first one learns about chords and their inversions, then of cadences, scales, sequential progressions, and harmonized scales. While the collection concludes with six example preludes written to precede specific pieces, he includes no description of the musical-compositional skills required to help students turn their scales into preludes. Kollmann's purpose, it seems, is not primarily to teach preluding, but to teach the principles of harmony that support preluding, that is, musical literacy:

The science of Music very much resembles a Language, and a person who can only play by Notes or memory but not out of his own Fancy or invention may be compared to one who can read a language and repeat some Parts of it, but who cannot converse in it. One object therefore in the study of

¹⁵. GRÉTRY, André-Ernest-Modeste. *Méthode simple pour apprendre à préluder en peu de temps avec toutes les ressources de l'harmonie*, Paris, Imprimerie de la République, an X (1801/1802), pp. 1-4. Surprisingly, a 'Memoirs of Grétry' published in 1818 in *The Quarterly Musical Magazine & Review* repeats Grétry's claims in the preface that: «By [Grétry's] method, in less than three months, one of the nieces of a Parisian Biographer, fifteen years old, knowing but little how to read music, having but little knowledge of fingering, has conceived and practiced the system of harmony in a way to astonish even composers». L. M. B. 'Memoirs of Gretry [sic]', in: *The Quarterly Musical Magazine & Review*, 1/4 (1818), pp. 438-448. Regardless of the accuracy of such an anecdote, it reiterates that the market for piano publications consisted largely of young women.

¹⁶. Similarly, Levesque comments: «Whereas seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises first lay a harmonic groundwork with figured bass progression to which keyboard figurations could later be applied in the improvisation of preludes, the reverse approach can be derived from many nineteenth-century treatises, which are largely exhaustive compendiums of virtuosic figurations that can be applied to harmonic progressions studied either concurrently or later». LEVESQUE, Shane. *Functions, Forms, and Pedagogical Approaches of the Improvised Nineteenth-Century Piano Prelude*, unpublished DMA Diss., Ithaca (NY), Cornell University, 2009, p. 7.

music should be to obtain the Capacity of expressing voluntary thoughts either before and between other pieces of regular composition or without regard to any musical piece¹⁷.

This is a condition Kollmann thinks most keyboardists have not achieved. «The mechanical part of playing is so much separated from the theoretical one» that it is possible to be a passable player with only minimal knowledge of music's construction¹⁸. Since it was evidently important for beginning or untutored keyboardists to play preludes before their pieces, Kollmann writes that they may «make themselves acquainted with some passages, which are calculated to serve for, and appear as, fancies of their own»¹⁹. Presumably, following sufficient harmonic instruction and practice of these examples one would be able to prelude.

In his 1796 *An essay on musical harmony*, Kollmann explains that «written fancies are more calculated for study than for general practice»²⁰. The written exemplar, according to Kollmann, is a pale imitation of an authentic, performed improvisation. Since the ephemerality of improvisation precludes protracted study, Kollmann provides a written form to aid in the understanding of a spontaneous art. Nevertheless, to attempt to learn improvisation without a harmonic basis would be in the words of one reviewer of a composed prelude collection like «teaching a parrot to reason»²¹.

In the second category falls Frédéric Kalkbrenner's 1849 *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste, principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à préluder et à improviser*. Kalkbrenner recognized that harmonic-centered treatises left a gap between theory and practice that many amateurs would find difficult to fill. He writes:

We therefore thought that the work, which we here offer to conscientious amateurs, would serve art in lifting a corner of this veil that covers the technical part of music and renders it almost incomprehensible to all those who are not deeply initiated into it²².

¹⁷. KOLLMANN, August Friedrich Christoph. *An Introduction to the Art of Preluding and Extemporizing*, London, R. Wornum, [1792?], p. 2.

¹⁸. ID. *An Essay on Practical Musical Composition, According to the Nature of that Science and the Principles of the Greatest Musical Authors*, London, The Author, 1799, p. 120.

¹⁹. *Ibidem*.

²⁰. ID. *An Essay on Musical Harmony, According to the Nature of that Science and the Principles of the Greatest Musical Authors*, London, J. Dale, 1796, p. 122.

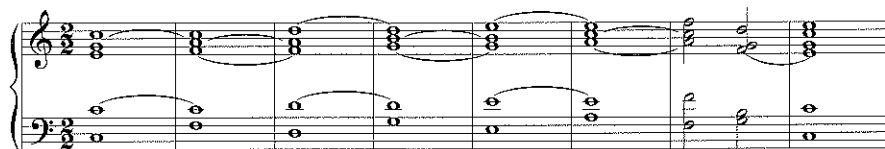
²¹. Anonymous review of P. A. Corri's *Original System of Preluding*, in: *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXIV/part I (January 1814), p. 60.

²². KALKBRENNER, Frédéric. *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste: principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à préluder et à improviser*, Paris, The Author, 1849, p. 1: «Nous avons donc pensé, que l'ouvrage que nous offrons aujourd'hui aux amateurs consciencieux, servirait l'art, en soulevant un coin de ce voile, qui recouvre la partie technique de la musique et la rend presque incompréhensible à tous ceux qui n'y sont pas profondément initiés».

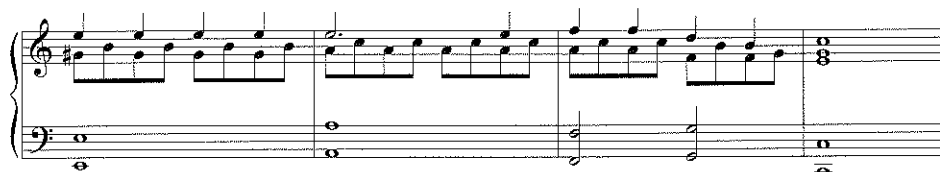
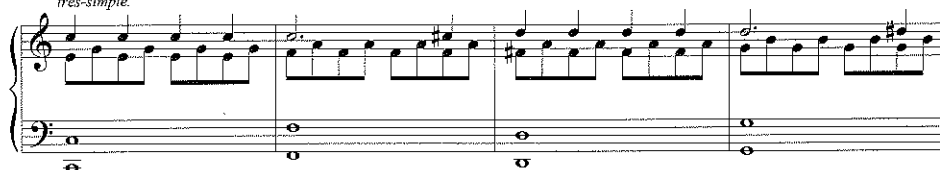
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Ex. 1: Frédéric Kalkbrenner, *Traité d'Harmonie du pianiste*, no. 1 with I and XIII variante.

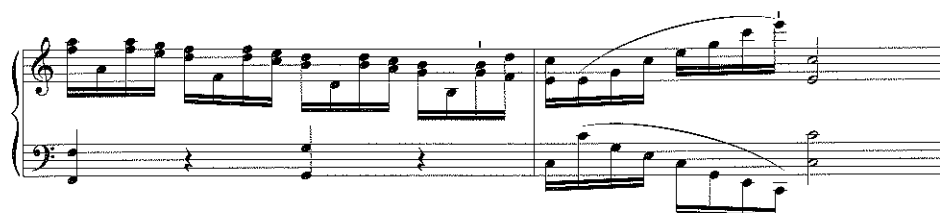
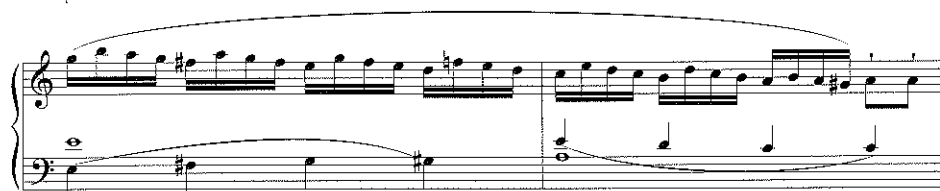
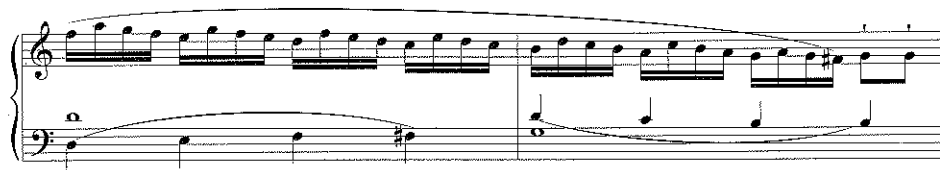
No. 1
Première marche
d'accords parfaits



1re Variante
très-simple.



13e [Variante]



Namely, Kalkbrenner composes progressively more complex figuration patterns for a single harmonic progression. In all, he offers 17 different ways of elaborating the same progression. «In not so long, by following this system» — that is, by memorizing and combining harmonic progressions with ornamental techniques — «[the young pianist] will make preludes, even small, very tolerable improvisations»²³. See Ex. 1.

Both Kollmann's and Kalkbrenner's prelude manuals are importantly different from the fully pre-composed prelude collections. The preludes in all keys composed by Johann Hummel are simple, though representative examples, of the musical language in these collections. See Ex. 2. Such pre-composed prelude publications lack harmonic instruction, instead serving four major functions, with any one collection adaptable to multiple uses.

Ex. 2: Johann Nepomuk Hummel, *Vorspiele vor Anfänge eines Stückes*, no. 3.

First, a pianist unable to prelude could memorize pre-composed preludes to perform before a composition. In 1818, a reviewer of J. B. Cramer's and T. Latour's collections writes:

Custom is all powerful and pianists must prelude. Custom cannot however give fancy and science to those who happen not to possess them

²³. *Ibidem*, pp. 38-39. «Dans bien peu de temps en travaillant d'après ce système il fera des préludes, voire même de petites improvisations très supportables».

and it follows that although these preludes are by courtesy supposed to be extemporaneous flights of imagination, it not unfrequently happens that they who can execute cannot compose. To obviate this otherwise insurmountable difficulty, authors [who] have been ready to lend their aid and memory may now supply the place of a deeper knowledge²⁴.

Those who played pre-composed preludes from memory were further instructed to make them seem spontaneous and improvised, often through metrical freedom. Domenico Corri writes in his *Original System of Preluding*: «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 fancy»²⁵.

Second, an appeal of these collections depended on their use by amateurs as short exercises. One reviewer writes:

In order for this production to turn a profit for everyone, it must suit for the most part amateur talents. This demand did not escape Mr. Cramer; he met it and seized at his point the right amount of mechanical difficulty²⁶.

This need also did not escape Henri Herz or Maria Szymanowska, both of whom included a reference to 'exercises' in the titles of their collections. Ignaz Moscheles similarly claimed that his preludes could be used as preparation for his studies. As the century progressed, fewer prelude collections were published, and those that were republished dropped the mention of their introductory use, functioning instead as short, moderately difficult studies²⁷.

Third, preludes were treated as easy character pieces. One such 1861 selection, organized by the *Revue et Gazette musicale*, published individual preludes from Stephen Heller's collection with descriptive titles (*Feu follet*, *Sérénade*, *Arabesque*, *Chanson de mai*, and *Berceuse*, among others). The targeted audience was 'dilettanti' as well as artists and amateurs²⁸. This use of preludes was more prevalent after mid-century, but it was also current earlier.

²⁴. Anonymous Review, in: *Quarterly Musical Magazine & Review*, 1/3 (1818), p. 395.

²⁵. Cited in anonymous review of P. A. Corri's *Original System of Preluding*, *op. cit.* (see note 21), p. 60.

²⁶. BOURGES, Maurice. 'Revue Critique: Trente-six Préludes mélodiques pour le Piano par J.-B. Cramer', in: *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, VII (1840), p. 525. «Pour que cette production tournât au profit de tous, il convenait de l'appropriier à la majeure partie des talents d'amateurs. Cette exigence n'a pas échappé à M. Cramer; il a rencontré et saisi à son point la juste mesure de difficulté mécanique».

²⁷. WOODRING GOERTZEN, Valerie. *Op. cit.* (see note 6), p. 336.

²⁸. 'Nouvelles', in: *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, XXVIII (1861), p. 13. BOTTE, Adolphe – BERLIOZ, Hector. 'Revue Critique: Stephen Heller, Préludes pour le piano, tirés de l'op. 81', in: *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, XXVIII (1861), pp. 235-236.

Fourth, an anonymous review of Kalkbrenner's prelude collection from 1827 comments on the compositional-didactic use for the preludes, as well as their use as stand-alone pieces:

The principle purpose, however, which such works as the present are calculated to effect, is to serve as a guide to enlightened persons who know how to apply their principles judiciously and by such assistance to write preludes for themselves.

While the «amateur», in the reviewer's opinion, «can hardly be expected even to attempt extempore performance of any kind» the preludes «may be considered as a very useful species of composition»²⁹.

To be sure, the preludes of Chopin's contemporaries derived from a common improvisatory musical language. Stock musical devices were easily strung together, cast in different moods, and overlaid with themes. Yet while such a common stylistic language was reliable, adaptable, and minimized the need for extensive preparation, this very utility also rendered each arpeggio, glitzy scale, or stock modulation more monotonous: each gesture was fungible with others, even as improvisers tried to speak with individual voices. Put another way, this musical language was ill-suited to creating a distinct and powerful impression without the added force of the performer who knowledgeably and artfully timed, shaped, and generally added life to these gestures. For the powerful effect improvisations had on audiences did not so much come from features of the musical language itself, as it did from the impression this language aided in creating: the audience was witnessing what had never before been heard, unfold before their ears and eyes.

The replacement of the improviser by the executer implied in these collections, then, was historically rather significant for the genre: the gestures characteristic of preluding were still notated, but in that notational form, spontaneity, fire, and passion could not be recorded. Indeed, as Hummel noted, (and as most musicians today would concur), performing with spirit required more than reading the notes, dynamics, and articulations correctly. Instead, a feel for spontaneity could develop only through years of musical and technical training — the very type of education the time-conscious, amateur audience who bought prelude collections no longer readily possessed.

We can begin to see how Chopin's Op. 28 fits into this prelude history by comparing two reviews by a historically-minded critic, Robert Schumann. In an 1835 review, Schumann writes that in Kessler's Preludes (Op. 31) and Bagatelles (Op. 30) «we have the individual finding for himself what is already at hand». He continues,

²⁹. Anonymous Review of Kalkbrenner's 'Introduction to the Art of Preluding,' in: *Quarterly Musical Magazine & Review*, IX/34 (1827), pp. 248-250.

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Ex. 3: Joseph Kessler, 24 *Préludes*, Op. 31, no. 4.

ALLEGRO NON TROPPO

The musical score is for Joseph Kessler's 24 *Préludes*, Op. 31, no. 4. It is in 3/4 time and consists of four systems of piano and right-hand staves. The first system is marked *f e brillante*. The second system is marked *mf e leggiero*. The third system has a '9' in a circle. The fourth system has an '8va' marking and is marked *ff*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

In short, our estimable colleague would appear well advised to examine his resources, to review the path he has travelled thus far and, finally, to desist from seeking refuge in the miniature, however assuming it may be, and in the rhapsodic. One cannot judge the power of Mount Aetna by the size of the stones it discharges; but people do gaze upwards in astonishment when its pillars of flame leap up towards the clouds. There is admonishment here for Kessler for having produced (in the metaphor) mere stones; for myself, too, for having picked them up and examined them without awaiting the greater eruption. I know that this is as premature as anticipating the felicitous perfection of an entire picture from a few sketches³⁰.

Schumann couches his critique of small forms in terms of a distinction between witnessing the actual improvisatory eruption and seeing the remains of that eruption later

³⁰. SCHUMANN, Robert. *Schumann on Music: A Selection from the Writings*, translated and edited by Henry Pleasants, New York, Dover, 1988, pp. 42-43.

in print³¹. In the heat of improvisation, when the audience is aware that the pianist is creating the prelude before their very eyes and ears, the improvisatory language sounds unpredictable and the pianist seems a force of nature. Indeed, Kessler's preludes are mostly short, full of rhythmic freedom, scales, arpeggios and other improvisatory gestures. However, as Schumann keenly observes, once the improvisation has been hardened into a written composition, the same notes can only be less impressive³². See Ex. 3.

Schumann's reaction to Chopin, on the other hand, acknowledges both Chopin's originality and Schumann's resulting surprise:

The *Préludes* I considered as strange pieces. I confess I imagined them differently, and designed in the grandest style, like his *Etudes*. But almost the opposite is true: they are sketches, beginnings of *Etudes*, or, so to speak, ruins, single eagle wings, everything motley and wildly chaotic. But each piece, written in his fine, pearly hand, shows: 'Frederick Chopin wrote it'. One recognizes him in the pauses by the passionate breathing³³.

Schumann's expectation for a vindication of the prelude genre, in line with Chopin's grand etudes, went unmet. The preludes were not merely a better or more virtuosic reworking of the genre's basic premises. While we can never know the full range of what a preluding pianist may have invented, the slowed-down mazurka of Chopin's A major prelude, his E minor lament, or the tri-partite Db major have no real precedents in contemporaneous prelude collections. On one level, it is doubtless the very expansion of musical possibilities that Schumann terms «motley and wildly chaotic».

But Schumann's language points even more strongly to an aesthetic of incompleteness found in Op. 28: the wing of the eagle, with the whole bird flown away, etude-like beginnings, but lacking the closure typical of that genre, and finally the ruin, whose once complete structure can exist only in the perceiver's imagination³⁴. To be sure, all prelude collections are literally incomplete since as published music they lack the irreducibly human element of improvisation to which they at the same time aspire. Yet while Chopin's

³¹. For more on Schumann's views on improvisation, see: GOOLEY, Dana. 'Schumann and the Agencies of Improvisation', in: *Rethinking Schumann*, edited by Roe-Min Kok and Laura Tunbridge, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 129-156.

³². Chopin certainly knew Kessler's *Préludes*; not only were Kessler's *Préludes* dedicated to Chopin, but Chopin partially returned the favor, dedicating the German edition of Op. 28 to Kessler.

³³. Translation based on CHOPIN, Fryderyk. *24 Préludes, Op. 28*, edited by Thomas Higgins, New York, W. W. Norton, 1973, p. 91 (Norton critical scores). Translation amended based on original text. SCHUMANN, Robert. 'Phantasieen, Capricen u. für Pianoforte', in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, XLI/11 (19 November 1839), pp. 161-163: «Die Praeludien bezeichnete ich als merkwürdig. Gesteh' ich, dass ich mir sie anders dachte und wie seine Etüden im größten Styl geführt. Beinahe das Gegentheil; es sind Skizzen, Studienanfänge, oder will man, Ruinen, einzelne Adlerfittige, alles bunt und wild durch einander. Aber mit seiner Perlenschrift steht in jedem der Stücke 'Friedrich Chopin schrieb's'; man erkennt ihn in den Pausen am heftigen Athmen».

³⁴. I develop an account of the *Préludes* relation to this culture of ruins more fully in my forthcoming *Chopin's Preludes and the Ruins of Improvisation*.

preludes also could never 'be' improvisations in this sense, their fragmentary qualities nevertheless do make striking moves toward evoking the feelings of improvisation.

BEGINNING AND ENDING IN OP. 28

The indeterminate musical language of published prelude collections — rhythmic freedom, rapid scalar passages and arpeggios, or a lack of memorable thematic material — was largely a debt to their functional history, at least according to an anonymous 1835 critic of Henri Herz: «It is only in preludes that one can pardon an apparent incertitude, an apparent lack of fixed and determined motif, because the prelude, by its nature, should limit itself to arousing attention, and preparing the mind with vague and general ideas»³⁵. Likewise, Hummel suggests the pianist begin an improvised prelude with soft, arpeggiated chords, regardless of the type of prelude to be improvised³⁶. If Chopin's preludes were to «prepare the spirit», or evoke the functional legacy of the preluding practice, they did so without «vague» or «general» ideas.

On the contrary, each prelude creates instantaneous presence through two connected musical features: first, the vast majority of the preludes are mono-thematic and mono-textural³⁷. Each prelude consists of a limited range of gestures and musical materials. Second, they waste no time beginning. Unlike Hummel's preludes, they do not announce that a pianist is now about to play, but open onto a homogenous thematic-motivic motion that has already attained its velocity. They, moreover, display a distinct inertia, memorable and differentiated from the expected improvisatory language of preluding.

Several preludes in Op. 28 end through a dying-out of the motivic material that preserves and slowly eliminates the feeling of presence. The musical techniques used in decay include slowing the harmonic rhythm, introducing pedal points toward the end of the preludes, dropping voices out of the texture, and fracturing or compressing motives. While I believe decay to be an important part of the preludes' aesthetic overall, I focus here on a single prelude, Op. 28 no. 8 in F \sharp minor³⁸.

³⁵. Anonymous review of Henri Herz's 'Exercices et Préludes pour le Piano-forte', in: *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 11/6 (1835), p. 51: «Ce n'est que dans des préludes qu'on peut pardonner une semblable incertitude, une semblable absence de motif fixe et déterminé, parce que le prélude, par sa nature, doit se borner à éveiller l'attention, et à préparer l'esprit par des idées vagues et générales».

³⁶. HUMMEL, Johann Nepomuk. *Op. cit.* (see note 8), p. 467. Hummel, it seems, mostly followed his own advice in his prelude collection: 13 of the 24 begin *piano* or similar dynamic.

³⁷. Some preludes do have an A-B-A structure, but Chopin seems careful to maintain the continuity of the motive over these expansions. This minimizes the sense of departure and return crucial to his other ternary pieces. The two exceptions to the mono-motivicism are the preludes with clearly differentiated middle sections: 13 (F \sharp) and 15 (D \flat). I address no. 15 in detail in my forthcoming *Chopin's Preludes and the Ruins of Improvisation*.

³⁸. Decay is not the only ending strategy in the preludes, but I believe it is defensibly present in many of them. Other preludes where decay occurs include: 1, 3, 6, 11, 12, 13, 15, 21, and hence this type of ending

This prelude earns the tempo marking *molto agitato*: its background texture is a nearly chaotic, perpetual movement — indeed so fast, that the rhythmic and pitch identities of the individual notes are smeared into a wave of sound³⁹. This background, behind the main motive, which Chopin had set in heavy print, is muddled by cross-rhythms formed between the left-hand triplet sixteenth notes and the right-hand thirty-seconds.

Each of three literal repetitions of the main motive (in measures 1, 5, 19) initiates a larger and more spectacular digression. Only following the first four-bar phrase is the antecedent neatly answered by a four-bar consequent. While step-wise motion in the melodic voice indicates that the prelude is in a transitional state, it is far less clear exactly when a place of stability has been reached. In m. 15, for example, a melody is repeated four times, but it is not a literal repetition, nor a transposition of the opening. In addition, harmonically speaking, it alternates F-half-diminished, D-fully-diminished-seventh chords and B_b major chords, the latter of which becomes the dominant of F_♯ through an enharmonic common-tone. In other words, this seeming melodic arrival takes place over significant harmonic instability and immediately preceding a restatement of the motive. The arrival in m. 19, if one can even call it that, is a slippage from the previous material. The non-existent transition smoothes over the sectional breaks between the main motivic sections — helping us avoid the feeling of a 'return'. The prelude shows how aspects of a single motive can morph, but how they can just as easily snap back to their original position. After returning to the opening material in m. 19, we hear a compressed version of the opening, whose continuation reaches higher to the climax of the prelude in m. 23. In this structure, all motion begins from and returns to the motive; the entire prelude has its genesis in a single melodic-textural idea.

Since all departures are grounded within the mono-motivic texture, there is nowhere to return *from* — no sense of closure as in departure and return. The prelude ends by withering away: beginning in m. 25, the prelude's harmonic motion is slowed, such that it takes an entire two bars to settle on the dominant. Only a single voice moves. The motive has been deprived of all its dynamicism; while maintaining the rhythmic and textural profile it had for the entire prelude, it now sits motionless. The tonic-subdominant harmonies, which are repeated in both minor and major before returning to the minor tonic in the third to last measure, simplify the prelude's harmonic vocabulary. Not quite a 'coda', since the prelude's loss of momentum starts before the concluding cadence, the static section is continuous with, and indeed a vital part of, the process of concluding⁴⁰.

might point to one important aspect of Chopin's generic conception.

³⁹. Due to the ready availability of the *Préludes*, I have not reprinted the score here.

⁴⁰. In his discussion of generic functions of inconclusive prelude endings, Kallberg writes «when the musical figure unfolded throughout the body of the prelude seemed unsuitable as a closing idea, Chopin evidently imported some other kind of notion to serve as the ending»; KALLBERG, Jeffrey. *Op. cit.* (see note 3), p. 153. Indeed, in many of the preludes, including the F_♯ minor, the final cadences stand apart from the mono-motivic textures. But as we have seen, the movement towards stasis begins far earlier than the last

Chopin's concern for conclusion in the F \sharp minor prelude will be put in relief through a comparison with a prelude that begins from similar musical material. Like Chopin's F \sharp minor prelude, Maria Szymanowska's Prelude no. 18 is an incessant repetition of a single rhythmic pattern. Additionally, Szymanowska creates a foreground and a background texture, although her background is simpler than Chopin's. For the first few phrases they show similar phrase structures. See Ex. 4.

Ex. 4: Maria Szymanowska, *Vingt Préludes et Exercices*, no. 18, beginning.



One substantial difference between the two conceptions is that Szymanowska repeatedly returns to literal or transposed versions of the opening material. Another is that to end, she cuts off the prelude's forward motion rather than decelerating its momentum. See Ex. 5.

Ex. 5: Maria Szymanowska, *Vingt Préludes et Exercices*, no. 18, end.



When faced with a similar challenge, Chopin makes the material of the prelude conscious of its own ending — the rhythmic motive must somehow stop — a decay necessitated by its strength.

two bars. Already in m. 25, the prelude has reached its static steady-state. The concluding chords confirm a process that began internal to the mono-motivic texture.

As printed sheet music, prelude collections were in several senses the material remains of a faded tradition: their musical language froze an improvisational idiom and their publication indicated the waning of improvisational skill in the sheet-music purchasing public⁴¹. In short, those who purchased and played prelude collections no longer quite belonged to the culture in which the prelude had most fully lived. These collections became incomplete — not because their notes failed to convincingly mimic improvised preludes — but because they lacked the aura of improvisation, of the pianist present to his or her audience.

While Chopin's preludes also lack the irreducibly human element of improvisation, they nevertheless do create a type of presence other collections do not. In eschewing narrative development and sectional contrast, and, instead, forging each prelude's musical world from a single motive and texture, Chopin creates a temporal experience like that of seeing an object rather than that of following a narrative. The preludes' beginnings and endings mark this type of temporality: their way of starting without preparation and immediately entering sound worlds is like the feeling of coming into contact with something, as if the preludes were immediately unearthed for us. Their «neutralized time» ends through revocation rather than through closure, as the experience of the object fades from perception and memory⁴². The change in presence that Op. 28 effected, I wish to suggest, is between the presence of a human improviser and the presence of a musical object⁴³. With preluding-practice dissipating, Chopin now elicited the feeling of communication, closeness, and immediacy that had earlier come from the pianist, now by the musical qualities of the composition. But the *Préludes* have a paradoxical kind of objecthood, for as we saw above, the feeling of presence is accompanied by an equally strong ephemerality.

⁴¹. It should be noted that preluding was still to be found among virtuosi into the beginning of the twentieth century, and hence it is necessary to contextualize the published prelude collections within the aspirations of an amateur musical culture. Kenneth Hamilton argues for a later decline of the preluding tradition amongst professional pianists. See HAMILTON, Kenneth. *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 133.

⁴². The term is Karol Berger's and this formulation of the *Préludes*' temporality is indebted to Berger's account of Bach fugues. See BERGER, Karol. *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow: an Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity*, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 2007, pp. 89-98.

⁴³. Note how Schumann's response to the *Préludes* invoked the physical presence of the composer heard in the music, as marked by his heavy breathing.

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APPENDIX

PRELUDE MANUALS AND PRELUDE COLLECTIONS

	DATE OF PUBL.	PLACE OF PUBL.	AUTHOR	TITLE	DESCRIPTION
(1) Simplified harmony manuals, or harmony works containing a section on preludes	1762	Leipzig	C. P. E. Bach	<i>Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments (Chapter 7)</i>	Advice on modulation and figured bass lines for remote modulations. Stresses that there are many other ways of modulating besides the printed examples. Figuration should be varied and enhance the harmonies. Example of a figured bass, and then the resultant Fantasia
	1771	Paris	Anton Bemetzrieder and Denis Diderot	<i>Leçons de Clavecin et Principles d'Harmonie</i>	Instruction in harmony culminates in the student's ability to 'prelude'. See pp. 300-313 for the student's preluding
	1787	Edinburgh	* Domenico Corri	<i>Complete Musical Grammar. With a concise Dictionary Comprehending all signs, Marks & Terms necessary to the practice of Music [...]</i>	Clarifies basic terms of music, including tempi, types of phrases, dynamics, and written out preludes
	1792	London	August F. C. Kollmann	<i>An Introduction to the Art of Preluding and Extemporizing</i>	Harmony treatise. Included six composed preludes for specific pieces
	1801	London	Muzio Clementi	<i>Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte</i>	Basics of reading musical notation. Preludes by Clementi to precede short excerpts of piano music. These preludes are one-line, elaborated cadences

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	1801	Paris	André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry	<i>Méthode Simple pour Apprendre à Préluder en peu de temps Avec toutes les ressources de l'Harmonie</i>	Simplified harmony textbook, few applied examples
(2) Assembly manuals	1800	London	* William Dance	<i>Preludes for the Piano Forte in Various Keys, Adapted to the different capacities of learners</i>	Once familiar with chords, describes how to attach runs to them
	1812	Leipzig	* Carl Gottlieb Hering	<i>Praktische Präluderschule oder Anweisung in der Kunst Vorspiele und zur Selbstübung entworfen</i>	Permutation tables, and ways to combine and alter triads or passages
	1819	Paris	* Henri Berton	<i>Jeu des Préludes harmoniques ou Compas et Boussole des deux Echelles de la Game musicale [...]</i>	Four tunable cards, showing chords and figuration patterns which could create preludes through assembly
	1836	Vienna	Carl Czerny	<i>A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Piano Forte</i>	Basic principles of improvisation, examples of chord progressions with figuration
	1837	London	* William Horsely	<i>Short Preludes for Pianists, composed, Fingered, and Inscribed to his Pupils</i>	Examples of harmonic fragments and instructions on how to ornament them
	1849	Paris	Frédéric Kalkbrenner	<i>Traité d'Harmonie du Pianiste</i>	Basic harmony, chord progressions, combined with figuration patterns
					Numbers refer to Czerny's classification (see below chart, +)
(3) Prelude Collections	177?	London	μ, B Tommaso Giordani	<i>Preludes for the Harpsichord or Piano Forte in all keys [sic] flat and sharp</i>	D [C Major and minor, D major and minor, E major and minor, F major and minor, G major and minor, A major and minor, B-flat, and E-flat]

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	1786		Muzio Clementi	<i>Clementi's Musical Characteristics</i>	(2) extended preludes imitating the styles of Haydn, Mozart, Clementi, and others
	1813 (?)		♯ P. A Corri	<i>Original System for Preluding</i>	Over 200 preludes that could be memorized, included a system for guessing chords
	1814		Johann Nepomuk Hummel	<i>Vorspiele vor Anfänge eines Stückes aus allen 24 Dur und Mol Tonarten zum nützlichen Gebrauch für Schüler</i>	(1) All are short, arpeggiated chords and gestures [key ordering as per Chopin]
	1818		Johann Baptist Cramer	<i>Twenty-Six preludes or short introductions in the Principal Major and minor keys for the piano forte</i>	(3) Presentation and juxtaposition of undeveloped ideas
	1818	Vienna	♯ Ferdinand Ries	<i>Quarante préludes pour le piano-forte en plusieurs tons majeurs et mineur</i>	♯
	1820	Leipzig	^ Maria Szymanowska	<i>Vingt Préludes et Exercises</i>	(2) Also includes repetitive exercise-like patterns
	1824		♯ Carl Czerny	<i>Präludien, Cadenzen, und kleine Fantasien, Op. 61</i>	♯
	1827	Paris	Frédéric Kalkbrenner	<i>Twenty-four preludes for the Piano Forte, in all major and minor keys, being an introduction to the art of preluding</i>	(2) Several also reveal thematic material (see Appendix 1) 11-page (!) final prelude, with fugal section [rising by half-step, with relative major]
	1827		Ignaz Moscheles	<i>50 Preludes in the Major and Minor Keys, intended as short introductions to any movement and as preparatory exercises to the author's studies, for the piano forte</i>	Mixture: most (1) types are longer than Hummels. (2) also common. Nearly half are unmeasured, (3) [no key ordering]

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	1829	Leipzig	♯ Carl Czerny	<i>48 Preludes in All Keys, Op. 161</i>	♯
	ca 1830	Paris	Henri Herz	<i>Exercices et Préludes pour le Piano Forte dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs dédiés à Monsieur J. N. Hummel</i>	(2) also includes one fully unmeasured prelude (#9), two partly unmeasured prelude (#1, 15). Concludes with a fugue [no key pattern, although often juxtaposed by relative or parallel relations]
	1830	London	★ Philip Potter	<i>54 Preludes or Impromptus in all major and minor keys, for the piano forte</i>	♯
	1835	Milan	Joseph Christoph Kessler	<i>24 Préludes pour le piano, à son ami Frédéric Chopin</i>	The majority are (1), but more elaborate versions than Hummel's. Some such as (21, 23, 24) are in between (1) and (2). Concludes with a fugal prelude [no key ordering]
	ca 1830-40	London, Paris	Carl Czerny	<i>The Art of Preluding as applied to the Piano Forte, consisting of 120 examples of Modulations, Cadences, and Fantasias</i>	120 example-preludes, including several pages of simple, several note cadences. Despite the name, there are no theoretical principles in this publication

KEY: ★ = information about this item was obtained from: MEYER, Thomas. 'Über das Verfertigen von Präludien: eine Gebrauchskunst zwischen Komposition und Improvisation', in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, CLX/4 (1999), pp. 24-29.

μ = information was obtained from: WOODRING GOERTZEN, Valerie. *Op. cit.* (see note 6).

♯ = information obtained from: TEMPERLEY, Nicholas. 'Preluding at the Piano', in: *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, edited by Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl, Urbana (IL), University of Illinois Press, 2009.

^ = only partial access to the source was available.

♯ = from anonymous review of P. A. Corri's 'Original System of Preluding', in: *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXIV/part 1 (January 1814), p. 60.

♯ = unable to access this source, or to find an adequate description in the literature, but documented here for future reference.

All others are from contact with the source.

+ CZERNY'S THREE CLASSIFICATIONS. Carl Czerny, in his *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, distinguishes among three types of preludes: the first is «quite short, as though through only a few chords, runs, passagework and transitional materials, one were trying out the instrument, warming up the fingers, or arousing the attention of listeners», which should conclude with the tonic of the following piece. The second type is «longer and more elaborate, just like an introduction belonging to the following piece; therefore, even thematic materials from the latter can be introduced therein», and they must end on a dominant of the following piece⁴⁴. Later, Czerny introduces a third type of prelude — the unmeasured — but does not give extensive instructions in its execution other than saying it proceeds «seemingly without conscious plan, resembling wandering into unknown regions»⁴⁵. Czerny's classification system applies reasonably well to the collections of pre-composed preludes published during the first half of the nineteenth-century, and the preludes in the Appendix have been classified by his standards, with added notes as needed.

⁴⁴. CZERNY, Carl. *Op. cit.* (see note 7), p. 5.

⁴⁵. *Ibidem*, p. 23.