

Functions and Performance Practice of Improvised Nineteenth-Century Piano Preludes

A tradition of improvising piano preludes continued unbroken throughout both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By surveying pedagogical treatises and notated examples, the scope of this genre, often too narrowly defined, can be broadened in order to reconstruct performance practice aspects of preluding in the nineteenth century and re-examine its various historical and potential present-day functions.

Ask a pianist to name one composer who wrote piano preludes in the nineteenth century, and undoubtedly nearly all will respond with Chopin. However, ask them to name a second composer and most will likely draw a blank. Definitions of the piano prelude are marginalized in many music encyclopedias as nothing more than short character pieces, typically listing a handful of composers who wrote twenty-four in every major and minor key, just like Bach. Surveying the composition lists of the major Romantic composer-pianists – Clementi, Beethoven, the Mendelssohns, the Schumanns, Liszt, Brahms, and others – would seem to suggest that they all composed very few works, if any, in this genre. This is true, as they *improvised* (rather than composed) many of their own preludes, unique to each piece and each performance.¹

The definition of the piano prelude extends well beyond Chopin's tightly constructed, measured, notated (and hence, fixed) compositions, which, when placed in the context of the treatises on improvisation, historical accounts, and published collections, are only but a small sample (albeit arguably a matchless sample) of one of the most widely cultivated keyboard genres in the nineteenth century. Chopin did not compose only twenty-six preludes, but likely improvised hundreds: revising, notating, and publishing his best examples in twenty-four major and minor keys. Yet they perhaps do not best exemplify what nineteenth-century audiences would have likely heard when an improvising pianist preluded. By surveying the pedagogical treatises and notated examples, this essay will attempt to broaden the scope of a genre often too narrowly defined in order to reconstruct performance practice aspects of preluding in the nineteenth century and re-examine its various historical and potential present-day functions.

Nineteenth-Century Improvisation Instructions

Nineteenth-century writers, including Philip Anthony Corri, Carl Czerny, François-Joseph Fétis, André Grétry, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Frédéric Kalkbrenner, Augustus Frederic Christopher Kollmann, Ignaz Moscheles, and Friedrich Wieck, wrote keyboard treatises that were known to, and even included examples by other well-known improvising

1 This essay complements Valerie W. Goertzen's excellent article, 'By Way of Introduction: Preluding by Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Pianists', *Journal of Musicology* 14/3 (1996), pp. 299-337, which also lists several sources on the piano improvisations of Felix Mendelssohn. Goertzen's discussion of Clara Schumann's piano preludes can be found in 'Setting the Stage: Clara Schumann's Preludes', in: Bruno Nettl (ed.) *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, Chicago etc.: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 237-60.

composer-pianists.² Their target audience included amateurs and their teachers, of both genders, all ages, and all ability levels. Unlike those found in the earlier treatises of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Joachim Quantz, Antonio Soler, and Daniel Gottlob Türk, nineteenth-century improvisation instructions were gradually emancipated from a prerequisite understanding of continuo realization and some do not employ figured bass numerals. Whereas seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises first lay a harmonic groundwork with figured bass progressions to which keyboard figurations can later be applied in the improvisation of preludes, the reverse approach can be obtained 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.³

Of particular interest is the guiding concept of *Spielfreudigkeit*, the sensation of pleasure experienced by a performer while playing, acknowledged today by many music pedagogues, psychologists, therapists, and performers as an intrinsic part of their improvisational practices. The accompanying notion that preluding at the keyboard is more of a physical, by-hand, sensual activity that even the younger amateur can experience, rather than a mental, by-mind, intellectual activity that only the learned should master, appears to have first been put forth by nineteenth-century writers. Their views, which incorporate the role of the subconscious, lack of attentive effort, and the fingers having a will all of their own, are at odds with the less abstract, more methodical approaches of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers.⁴

Collections of composed preludes occasionally contained title pages indicating that they were not only published for performing, but were also examples intended for study, borrowing, imitating, and improvisatory modeling.⁵ To enhance their marketability (and this appears to have been a lucrative business), these collections were sometimes arranged by difficulty level instead of tonality and even included sets for players with small hands.⁶ These treatises with instructions on preluding and literally thousands of composed examples appeared in multiple German, French, Italian, and English translated editions. Arguably, the prelude became an improvised genre more widely cultivated in the nineteenth century in both piano pedagogy *and* concert performance and among both amateurs *and* professionals than any other composed genre.

When to Improvise Piano Preludes

According to Czerny, 'It is akin to a crown of distinction for a keyboardist, particularly in private circles at the performance of solo works, if he does not begin directly with the composition itself but (...) [with] a suitable prelude.'⁷ He believed that every pianist should be able to improvise unique preludes every time before every appropriate piece played, alone while practicing or during public performances.⁸ Preluding was acceptable during any solo

2 Complete citations for all of these treatises can be found in the concluding bibliography.

3 Czerny believed that improvisation could begin at a younger age once a moderate skill in playing had been achieved, superseding any prerequisite mastery of figured bass realization, dissonance resolution, and counterpoint (although these would later be indispensable for advancing one's art). Czerny, *Letters to a Young Lady on the Art of Playing the Pianoforte*, pp. 78-82.

4 Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, pp. 43, 50, 74.

5 For example, from their collection title pages, Kalkbrenner's Op. 88, '*pouvant servir d'exemple pour apprendre à préluder*', Paris: Pleyel, 1827; and Hummel's Op. 67 '*zum nützlichen Gebrauche für Schüler*', Vienna: Artaria, c.1814-5.

6 An example of this latter type is Guiseppe Concone's Op. 37 collection, available through New York: Schirmer, 1902.

7 Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction*, p. 6.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 15-6.

performance and (in accordance with Türk but in contradiction with Quantz) it was even acceptable when accompanying chamber instruments were present if it was kept short. Preluding was unacceptable when a full orchestra was present, particularly if the composition that followed opened with a *tutti*. However, given that this is a recurring complaint by some writers and was considered acceptable by others, and that notated examples for concerto movements do exist, it likely still occurred, sometimes as an accompaniment for the tuning of instruments.⁹ Still for other writers, performing improvised preludes for an audience was deemed an unacceptable and unnecessary practice altogether.¹⁰

It should also be noted that certain compositions require no introductory prelude and certain preludes require no paired composition. Examples of the former include the most serious works, such as Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata;¹¹ an example of the latter must include William Sterndale Bennett's Prelude in C Flat Major from his more-than-complete cycle of Op. 33, for which it is impossible to think of another work in the same key for a paired match.¹² It is also difficult to understand exactly when and how composers intended certain notated examples to be performed. Czerny's Prelude No. 5 in C Major, Op. 61, quotes the opening theme from the third movement of Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata. It is unlikely that this prelude would have been performed after the second movement, which already functions as an introductory prelude to the finale, unless the finale was excerpted and performed on its own (which is likely) or the prelude was simply intended to be performed unattached with the quoted themes merely referencing the *Waldstein* and not actually functioning to introduce it.

Why to Improvise Piano Preludes

Despite criticism leveled in the nineteenth century (which is sometimes still voiced today) as being little more than 'tasteless, empty virtuosity', the improvised prelude is conceivably one of the most functional genres in music. In the very least, during an era that lacked dimming houselights and brightening spotlights to hush audiences silent for a performer's grand entrance onto an elevated concert platform, preludes aroused the audience's attention and cued the start of a concert (or, in a later era for Georges Cziffra, a BBC recording session¹³); silenced applause (as Joseph Hofmann did during his New York City Golden Jubilee Concert on 28 November 1937¹⁴); and created moods compatible with the compositions that followed (as Wilhelm Backhaus occasionally did while performing Liszt¹⁵). Improvised preludes can serve as a means to initiate and sustain several important musical and social connections: between the performer and their instrument; between the performer and their repertoire; between the performer and their audience; and self-serving for the performer only. The following list summarizes the various reasons (both mentioned and unmentioned in historical treatises) to improvise preludes, many of which have origins dating back centuries and nearly all of which are still applicable today.

9 Czerny's Op. 61 collection, Vienna: Diabelli, [1820?], contains an introductory prelude for the finale of Ferdinand Ries' Piano Concerto in E Flat Major.

10 See Goertzen, 'By Way of Introduction', p. 306.

11 Czerny, *Systematic*, p. 18.

12 It was probably only intended to be paired with the lesson in trills that follows, also in C Flat Major. Bennett's Op. 33 collection, London: Leader & Cock, 1853.

13 As of 28 December 2007, this can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf2accwGEaU>.

14 New York: International Piano Archives, IPA 5001-2, 1977.

15 Alfred Brendel, *Music Sounded Out: Essays, Lectures, Interviews, Afterthoughts*, New York: Noonday Press, 1992, p. 208. The art of the improvised piano prelude continued into the late Romantic era with many notable pianists including Hans von Bülow, Ferruccio Busoni, Percy Grainger, Vladimir de Pachmann, Arthur Rubinstein, Emil von Sauer, and others.

Functions that serve a performer only:

- to warm up the fingers;
- to extract the most difficult passages from the programmed compositions for preperformance practice;
- to calm the nervous pianist (and/or collaborative musicians);
- to remedy physical needs; for use in music therapy and rehabilitation practices.

Functions that serve to support a performer-instrument/venue connection:

- to try out an unfamiliar piano;
- to check the tuning and temperament;
- to permit accompanying instruments to tune discretely;
- to test the acoustics of a performance environment;
- to exploit the capabilities of a new or improved piano;
- to provide incidental music (for theatre scenes, set changes, etc.);
- to accompany dance movements;
- to negotiate an unexpected change in a performance variable (e.g. different instrument or venue).

Functions that serve to support a performer-repertoire connection:

- to prepare the key, mode, or opening pitch;
- to link phrases or movements;
- to function as an improvised introduction for a programmed composition that lacks a notated introduction by the composer;
- to expand or condense composed music; 'to adorn rather dull and dragging' compositions, to 'tone them down or build them up' (Czerny);
- to construct a linked suite of shorter pieces comparable in length to a longer work;[†]
- to allow a performer to dedicate, reinterpret, or respond to the musical ideas inherent in a composition before performing the text as notated.[†]

Functions that serve to support a performer-audience connection:

- to arouse the audience's attention;
- to cue the start of a concert; to silence applause;
- to create a mood compatible with a programmed composition;
- to create a mood portraying the performer's frame of mind;[†]
- to allow performers to establish their 'bags of tricks' ('angemessenes Hokuspokus', Heinrich Christoph Koch): uniquely virtuosic identity traits (once displayed in competitions);
- to counteract flagging audience attention; to demonstrate that as an astute performer, you are aware of their 'needs';
- to create the impression of 'spontaneity, risk, or danger'; to make the performance more memorable;
- to conjure music that defies notation (Czerny on Beethoven and Hummel);
- to force listeners to stop evaluating, or evaluate differently, as comparison to any 'fixed, authentic, or known' score becomes impossible.

[†] As Clara Schumann often did when programming Robert's works. See Goertzen, 'Setting the Stage', p. 240- 54.

Table 1

Functions of Improvised Piano Preludes.

With regard to the functions of improvised preludes that serve to support the performer-repertoire connection (the third category listed in the chart), Czerny states that solo compositions lacking notated introductions by composers (especially rondos and variations that begin directly with the theme) are eligible candidates for improvised preludes by the performer.¹⁶ For Czerny, improvised additions could be effectively used 'to adorn rather dull and dragging' compositions, to 'tone them down or build them up', for 'the performer can display artistry a good deal more' in these passages than in the composition itself.¹⁷ Czerny was constantly attentive to his audience's 'needs' during a performance and he manipulated his improvisations to temper and satisfy them. He also evaluated the improvisations of other pianists by their ability to do this as well. Resorting to improvisation could counteract flagging audience attention, for 'the very destructive fear of boring the audience can have a detrimental effect on the artist's concentration, inventiveness, inspiration, and good spirits'.¹⁸ Because improvisation is more enticing, unpredictable, and can even conjure music that defies notation (an observation he makes of Beethoven and Hummel), audiences typically listen more attentively during improvisation, assuring that the performance is made memorable. All of this would seem to suggest that it was of greater importance in the nineteenth century for performers to establish and maintain a connection with their audience, whereas on stages today, many performers endeavor to connect with only their composers' intentions. With one eye and one ear in their music and the other always in their audience, nineteenth-century pianists could tailor their improvisations for their listeners provided that they were always keenly aware of who was in attendance, to which opera they had been down the street the night prior, and what their tastes and preferences were. As Czerny states, 'In dealing with a largely heterogeneous public, surely the majority by far will be entertained only by pleasant, familiar tunes and will be sustained in spirit by piquant and glittering [improvised] performances.'¹⁹

Implications for Performers Today

Given Czerny's insistence that the forms of improvised genres are highly flexible and that preludes should never be repeated identically, it prompts one to speculate as to when and where it might then be arguably appropriate, in restoring and respecting the spirit of the time rather than reiterating the exact letter of the score, to replace a composer's own notated, attached, introductory prelude example with a performer's own improvised version. Many notated introductions of compositions conform to the treatise descriptions and are actually prelude improvisations; sometimes, but not always, they are even labeled as such. Would Liszt have improvised preludes for those Transcendental Etudes or Hungarian Rhapsodies that lack notated preludes? Would Liszt have preluded for the same piece in exactly the same way, every time and in every place where it was performed? (If so, his former teacher, Czerny, would have likely disapproved.) Given the existence of alternate transcriptions of the same *Die Forelle* melody, alternate cadenzas for the same *Sospiro* etude, and alternate *ossia* passages in the same opera fantasy where it is sometimes even difficult to tell whether one part is supposed to be easier or more effective than another, it does not seem to be a completely unreasonable assertion that other 'small-print notes' might also have been recomposed through improvisation, personalized by individual pianists for specific

16 Czerny, *Systematic*, p. 17.

17 Ibid., pp. 26-35. Here, as in other passages, Czerny seems to equate 'artistry' with virtuosic brilliance through improvised additions.

18 Ibid., p. 86.

19 Ibid.

performance settings.²⁰

Several further observations concerning prelude performance practice warrant mentioning. First, preluding is never 'period instrument' specific and should be crafted to any instrument's entire range, dynamic, color, and pedal capabilities. It is hard to imagine that Czerny limited his improvisations on an Erard because the Broadwood that he may have been more accustomed to improvising upon at some point had a smaller octave range. (Likewise, it is hardly possible for most pianists today to restrain themselves from improvising something that allows them to experience the extended bass range of the Bösendorfer.) Second, regarding the interpretation of rhythm in the notated prelude examples, because one or more elements, either meter, bar lines, or rhythm, might be absent (although the latter is rare), note values are occasionally illogical and often do not clearly convey tempo and rubato. Deciding upon the exact lengths and releases of sustained left hand accompaniment chords is usually necessary where their notation is ambiguous.²¹ For reasons dependent upon instruments, acoustics, and expression, figuration might be repeated more often in performance than is actually notated in the score, especially when it is to be effectively combined with accelerandos, ritardandos, crescendos, and diminuendos.²² Third, visually arresting engraved scores surely translated into visually arresting fingerings, hand divisions, and crossings. Many non-legato fingerings are unusual when compared to modern legato methods and repetitious fingering patterns are typically employed for repetitious figuration, regardless of its layout on the keyboard topography. To preserve symmetry, correctly composed notes are sometimes sacrificed altogether.²³ Curiously, fingering requires less awareness when improvising in certain keys and with certain figuration, especially if there is a prevalence of black keys as the number of fingering possibilities diminishes; although this is a subjective observation that likely results from improvisers acquiring a portfolio of comfortable 'stock devices' during early experimentations in specific keys.

Finally, perhaps the most useful advice that the treatises and notated examples have to offer is how a performer might stall while improvising when they cannot think of what to do next. Tricks of the trade, as illustrated in many of Czerny's examples, include: *Spielfreude* figurations over long chord prolongations and static harmonic rhythms; lengthy retransitions with dominant preparations that extend V to V⁷ and finally Vb⁹; sudden rests and dramatic *lunga* pauses; expressive (and sometimes excessive) streams of repeated notes; gradually accelerating trills and tremolos with drawn out crescendos and diminuendos; slowly arpeggiated chords upon which one can ponder what is going to come next; repeating whatever the right hand has just done with the left hand or in

20 When Alexander Siloti performed the 14th Hungarian Rhapsody for Liszt having made his own alterations and omissions, Liszt reportedly said, 'I not only acquiesce in, but thoroughly approve of what you have done, in proof whereof I give you my permission to make any alterations and omissions you wish – and this at any time, even after I am gone; for I know that what you consider necessary will not be detrimental to the music – indeed you may say in such cases that it is as I wished it.' (I am grateful to my colleague Anders Vinge for relating this anecdote.) See Siloti, 'My Memories of Liszt', in: *Remembering Franz Liszt*, New York: Limelight, 1986, p. 359.

21 This is especially apparent in Johann Baptist Cramer, 26 *Préludes dans les modes majeurs et mineurs les plus usité pour le pianoforte*, Bonn: Simrock, 1819, which are entirely unmeasured.

22 The prelude to Liszt's *Ricordanza* Transcendental Etude might serve as a good example: the effect is not lessened (and may even be heightened) if the right hand *velocissimo* figuration is repeated more than 9 times before the left hand enters with its V⁷ arpeggio in m. 14.

23 For example, if a pattern is better suited to the hand when the leading is not, but should be, raised in a minor key, it might be left lowered. In Kalkbrenner's Prelude No. 20 in a minor, Op. 88, m.2, he chooses all B naturals in the more comfortable descending right hand figuration consisting entirely of white notes, despite the left hand having just sounded a B Flat Major chord.

rhythmic augmentation; using more brilliant passagework to ‘naturally mitigate the monotony’²⁴; and ‘if, in default of ideas of your own readily offering themselves, you should avail yourself of such as you have learned from other compositions, such assistance is always very excusable.’²⁵ If one does fail, Czerny advises never to be satisfied with a single attempt, for too much depends upon the mood of the moment.

The art of the improvised piano prelude has largely fallen silent today on stage and in the lesson, the latter perhaps paradoxically due in part to the parallel increase in notated prelude improvisations and composed collections for performance. However, restoring this improvised practice could serve several important purposes beyond the practical functions listed earlier. First, for analysts, ‘lineages of improvisation’ between teachers and their students or distinctive identifying traits of improvising composer-pianists might be discerned by comparing treatises and notated examples. For example, one might compare the treatment of ideas contained in multiple piano preludes by the same pianist or by different pianists for the same known theme, such as those by Andrei Schulz-Evler, Moriz Rosenthal, Georges Cziffra, and Max Reger for the famous melody of Strauss’s *Blue Danube Waltz*. Second, for conservatory piano teachers, re-implementing the pedagogical approaches of nineteenth-century treatises can allow students to fashion their orthodox technical requirements (often expected at graded juries) into unique, more imaginative preludes portraying some personality (even if the improvisatory elements are prepared in advance). Finally, and most importantly, for classical audiences who have largely grown accustomed to sitting in dark, impersonal concert halls as silent, passive witnesses to stage performances, improvised genres are an important means for performers to bridge any gap and personally engage with their audiences (and not only their composers). After all, an audience’s active listening and participation will help to ensure that they will return again someday for more.

Selected bibliography of nineteenth-century sources containing relevant discussions on keyboard improvisation and/or preluding:

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24 Czerny, *Systematic*, p. 62.

25 Czerny, *Letters*, p. 80.

Kalkbrenner, Frédéric (1849) *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste: Principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à préluder et à improviser*, Op. 185, Amsterdam: Heuwekemeyer, 1970 (reprint of the Paris edition).

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