Ersatz Improvisation: Chopin’s Opus 28 and the Published Prelude Collection

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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 spontaneity in their character which will gain for the performer, — if he play them accurately by memory, and freely, — all the credit of unpremeditated effusions». 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 Kesseler, Johann Baptist Cramer, Henri Herz, and many others contain short pieces in a variety of keys and each was — whether explicit or implicit — 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.

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 them4. 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

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 EHRENDINGER, 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 piece\(^1\). 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 performance\(^6\). 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 audience\(^7\).

Impromptu 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-Forthe-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»\(^4\).

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

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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 scattered.

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 great.

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

\footnote{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 aufgeregtten Kräfte auf Einen Punkt
behrlich 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 zerstreut wird».

\footnote{Translation after Woodring Goertzen, Valerie, Op. Cit. (see note 0), 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 piano\textsuperscript{11}. 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»\textsuperscript{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 \textit{homme non-spécialisé}, whose extinction signaled the erosion of a way of life founded on pure sociability and reflection rather than professional responsibility»\textsuperscript{13}.

For amateurs who wanted to learn about musical ‘aesthetics’ but lived busy lives, François-Joseph Fétis’s 1830 \textit{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. Obliged 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 want?\textsuperscript{14}

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

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\textsuperscript{12} Kale, Steven. \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 174.

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 preluding. 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 progressions. 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


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.
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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 piece.

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 construction. 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». 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 practices». 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».

In the second category falls Frédéric Kalkbrenner's 1849 *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste, principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à prélider 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 it.

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19. *Ibidem*.

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Ex. 1: Frédéric Kalkbrenner, *Traité d'Harmonie du pianiste*, no. 1 with i and xiii 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 systems — that is, by memorizing and combining harmonic progressions with ornamental techniques — «[the young pianist] will make preludes, even small, very tolerable improvisations»31. 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 Anfange 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

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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 knowledge.24

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 difficulty.26

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 studies.27

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 amateurs.28 This use of preludes was more prevalent after mid-century, but it was also current earlier.

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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 compositions».

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,

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Allegro non troppo

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 sketches\textsuperscript{30}.

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.

in print. 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 impressive. 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 breathing.

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 F minor lament, or the tripartite Db major have no real precursors in contemporaneous prelude collections. On one level, it is doubtless the very expansion of musical possibilities that Schumann terms “motely 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 imagination. 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

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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.


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♯ minor38.


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♯) and 15 (D♯). 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 sound. This background, behind the main motive, which Chopin had set in heavy print, is muddied 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 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 smooths 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 concluding.

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

99. 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, Kalberg 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 endings; Kalberg, 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
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Chopin’s concern for conclusion in the F♯ minor prelude will be put in relief through a comparison with a prelude that begins from similar musical material. Like Chopin’s F♯ 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.

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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.
ERSATZ IMPROVISATION: CHOPIN’S OPUS 28 AND THE PUBLISHED PRELUDE COLLECTION

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 public\(^4\). 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 memory\(^4\). 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 object\(^4\). 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.

\(^4\) 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.

\(^4\) 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.

\(^4\) 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.
### Prelude Manuals and Prelude Collections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Publ.</th>
<th>Place of Publ.</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1762</td>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>C. P. E. Bach</td>
<td><em>Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments (Chapter 7)</em></td>
<td>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</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Anton Bemetzrieder and Denis Diderot</td>
<td><em>Légons de Clavecin et Principes d'Harmonie</em></td>
<td>Instruction in harmony culminates in the student’s ability to ‘prelude’. See pp. 300–313 for the student’s preluding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1787</td>
<td>Edinburgh</td>
<td><em>Domenico Corri</em></td>
<td><em>Complete Musical Grammar. With a concise Dictionary Comprehending all signs, Marks &amp; Terms necessary to the practice of Music […]</em></td>
<td>Clarifies basic terms of music, including tempi, types of phrases, dynamics, and written out preludes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>August F. C. Kollmann</td>
<td><em>An Introduction to the Art of Preluding and Extemporizing</em></td>
<td>Harmony treatise. Included six composed preludes for specific pieces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Muzio Clementi</td>
<td><em>Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte</em></td>
<td>Basics of reading musical notation. Preludes by Clementi to precede short excerpts of piano music. These preludes are one-line, elaborated cadences</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Ersatz Improvisation: Chopin’s Opus 28 and the Published Prelude Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Author/Translator</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1801</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry</td>
<td>Méthode Simple pour Apprendre à Préluder en peu de temps Avec toutes les ressources de l'Harmonie</td>
<td>Simplified harmony textbook, few applied examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1809</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>* William Dance</td>
<td>Preludes for the Piano Forte in Various Keys, Adapted to the different capacities of learners</td>
<td>Once familiar with chords, describes how to attach runs to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1812</td>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>* Carl Gottlieb Hering</td>
<td>Praktische Präbildschule oder Anweisung in der Kunst Vorspiele und zur Selbstbahrung entworfen</td>
<td>Permutation tables, and ways to combine and alter triads or passages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>* Henri Bertron</td>
<td>Jeu des Préludes harmoniques ou Compas et Bousole des deux Estelles de la Gare musicale […]</td>
<td>Four tunable cards, showing chords and figuration patterns which could create preludes through assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
<td>Carl Czerny</td>
<td>A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Piano Forte</td>
<td>Data, principles of improvisation, examples of chord progressions with figuration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>* William Hornby</td>
<td>Short Preludes for Pianists, composed, Fingered, and Inscribed to his Pupils</td>
<td>Examples of harmonic fragments and instructions on how to ornament them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Frédéric Kalkbrenner</td>
<td>Traité d'Harmonie du Pianiste</td>
<td>Basic harmony, chord progressions, combined with figuration patterns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Numbers refer to Czerny’s classification (see below chart, +)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>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]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17??</td>
<td>London Paul, B Tommaso Giordani</td>
<td>Preludes for the Harpsichord or Piano Forte in all keys [sic] flat and sharp</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Composer</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>1786</td>
<td>Muzio Clementi</td>
<td><em>Clementi's Musical Characteristics</em> (2) extended preludes imitating the styles of Haydn, Mozart, Clementi, and others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1813 (?)</td>
<td>P. A Corri</td>
<td><em>Original System for Preluding</em> Over 200 preludes that could be memorized, included a system for guessing chords</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1814</td>
<td>Johann Nepomuk Hummel</td>
<td><em>Verspiele vor Anfange eines Stückes aus allen 24 Dur und Mol Tonarten zum nützlichen Gebrauch für Schüler</em> (1) All are short, arpegiated chords and gestures [key ordering as per Chopin]</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>Johann Baptist Cramer</td>
<td><em>Twenty-Six preludes or short introductions in the Principal Major and minor keys for the piano forte</em> (3) Presentation and juxtaposition of undeveloped ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>Vienna</td>
<td>B Ferdinand Ries</td>
<td><em>Quarante préludes pour le piano-forte en plusieurs tons majeurs et mineurs</em> (P)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>A Maria Szymanowska</td>
<td><em>Vingt Préludes et Exercises</em> (2) Also includes repetitive exercise-like patterns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>Carl Czerny</td>
<td><em>Präludien, Cadenzen, und kleine Fantasien, Op. 6</em> (P)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Frédéric Kalkbrenner</td>
<td><em>Twenty-four preludes for the Piano Forte, in all major and minor keys, being an introduction to the art of preluding</em> (2) Several also reveal thematic material (see Appendix 1) 11-page (!) final prelude, with fugal section [rising by half-step, with relative major]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ignaz Moscheles</td>
<td>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 Mixture: most (1) types are longer than Hummels. (2) also common. Nearly half are unmeasured, (3) [no key ordering]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Ersatz Improvisation: Chopin's Opus 28 and the Published Prelude Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>Carlo Czerny</td>
<td>48 Preludes in All Keys, Op. 161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>Henri Herz</td>
<td>Exercises et Préludes pour le Piano Forte dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs dédiés à Monsieur J. N. Hummel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Philip Potter</td>
<td>54 Preludes or Improvisus in all major and minor keys, for the piano forte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>Milan</td>
<td>Joseph Christoph Kessler</td>
<td>24 Préludes pour le piano, à son ami Frédéric Chopin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836-40</td>
<td>London, Paris</td>
<td>Carlo Czerny</td>
<td>The Art of Prebuling as applied to the Piano Forte, consisting of 120 examples of Modulations, Cadences, and Fantaisies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: * = information about this item was obtained from: MEYER, Thomas. 'Über das Verfeinern von Präludien: eine Gebrauchskunst zwischen Komposition und Improvisation', in: Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, clxx/4 (1990), pp. 24-29.
μ = information was obtained from: WOODRING GOERTZEN, Valerie. Op. cit. (see note 6).
^ = only partial access to the source was available.
D = 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: Carlo Czerny, in his A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte, distinguishes among three types of prelude: the first is quite short, as though through only a few chords, runs, passagework and transitional material; 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 later can be introduced therein, and they must end on a dominant of the following piece⁴. 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 regions⁵. 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.

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⁵ Ibidem, p. 23.