

Preludes

Jan Lisiecki piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Prelude in D flat Op. 28 No. 15 (1838-9)

Prelude in A flat B86 (1834)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Prelude in C from *The Well-tempered Clavier* Book I
BWV846 (1722)

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Prelude in D minor Op. 23 No. 3 (1901-3)

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Prelude in B minor Op. 1 No. 1 (1899-1900)

Prelude in D minor Op. 1 No. 2 (1899-1900)

Prelude in D flat minor Op. 1 No. 3 (1899-1900)

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

From *Préludes* (1928-9)

*La colombe • Chant d'extase dans un paysage
triste • Le nombre léger*

Fryderyk Chopin

Prelude in C sharp minor Op. 45 (1841)

Sergey Rachmaninov

Prélude from *Morceaux de fantaisie* Op. 3 (1892)

Henryk Mikolaj Górecki (1933-2010)

From 4 *Preludes* Op. 1 (1955)

Molto agitato • Molto allegro quasi presto

Johann Sebastian Bach

Prelude in C minor from *The Well-tempered Clavier*
Book I BWV847 (1722)

Sergey Rachmaninov

Prelude in G minor Op. 23 No. 5 (1901-3)

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin

24 Preludes Op. 28 (1838-9)

*Prelude in C • Prelude in A minor • Prelude in G •
Prelude in E minor • Prelude in D • Prelude in B
minor • Prelude in A • Prelude in F sharp minor •
Prelude in E • Prelude in C sharp minor • Prelude
in B • Prelude in G sharp minor • Prelude in F
sharp • Prelude in E flat minor • Prelude in D flat •
Prelude in B flat minor • Prelude in A flat •
Prelude in C minor • Prelude in E flat • Prelude in
C minor • Prelude in B flat • Prelude in G minor •
Prelude in F • Prelude in D minor*

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In concert, the artist is usually sharply focused on the present. In playing the preludes, however, there is always a sense of anticipation, of preparing and looking towards the next piece. By definition, and certainly by tradition, a prelude anticipates the main presentation, setting the stage by creating a mood and colour. Can a recital be composed entirely of such introductions, then, one leading directly into the next, and still be profound? A master of the short form, Chopin brought the prelude out from the shadows and into the spotlight. Using its concise format and flexible form, Chopin embraced its ability to establish a mood. The collection of *24 Preludes Op. 28* is a colour wheel of emotions, showcasing all 24 keys and the atmospheres they can convey. Instead of foreshadowing the masterpiece, they become the focal point, and despite their individual brevity, Chopin was always able to fully develop his melodic concepts. Certainly there is a sense of each *Prelude* 'falling' into the next one, and there are even some indications in the score that span between individual pieces. Yet, these works can also be taken out of context, so to speak. For this reason I am presenting Chopin's *Prelude Op. 28 No. 15* twice in this programme, to demonstrate its different function as a worthy standalone piece, as compared to its forming part of the greater whole (in this case the set of *Op. 28 Preludes*). While Chopin reinvented the prelude format with the aforementioned set, other composers also embraced this open-ended musical form with newfound purpose, stamping it with their individuality. In this recital, I hope to showcase the broad possibilities of the humble prelude, from Bach to Górecki, taking the audience on a musical expedition and answering the above-posed rhetorical question with an emphatic 'yes'.

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Chopin began composing his *24 Preludes* in 1836 and completed the set in January 1839 while on a trip to Mallorca with his lover George Sand. No 15 in D flat (popularly known as the 'Raindrop' *Prelude*, though Chopin disapproved of any pictorial associations) has a serene melody accompanied by repeated notes. In the middle section this accompaniment becomes disturbingly obsessive, leading towards a *fortissimo* climax. The stand-alone *Prelude B86* (1834) is a model of lightness and grace, with a big crescendo at its centre.

Bach's *The Well-tempered Clavier* – two books of preludes and fugues in all the keys, sometimes known as 'The 48' – begins with what has become the most familiar, a C major piece of disarming simplicity, based on arpeggios.

This first of **Rachmaninov's** two sets of preludes (1901-3) consists of 10 pieces. Though marked *Tempo di minuetto*, Op. 23 No. 3 is far from the traditional dance-form in character, while there is also a march-like element which seems at odds with the 3/4 time-signature.

Szymanowski's first published work was a group of nine preludes which date from 1899-1900, though some may have been written when he was only 14. In these three touching *Preludes* his refined sensibility and rather sensuous tendency are palpable. These are followed by the first three from a group of eight which **Messiaen** wrote at the age of 20. *La colombe* is the first of Messiaen's numerous bird-pieces, sensitive and gently evocative. *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* has an exquisite middle section in slightly faster tempo. *Le nombre*

léger demands from the pianist agility and a light singing tone. The ending is brilliant and itself ecstatic.

The next stand-alone prelude, dating from 1841, fully deserves to be ranked with Chopin's *Opus 28 Preludes*. More extended than any of the Op. 28 set and nocturne-like in character, this hauntingly beautiful work has a brief cadenza towards the end.

Of the five pieces comprising the *Morceaux de fantaisie* (1892), the *Prélude* became Rachmaninov's most popular composition – so much so that he wished he had never written it. Its over-familiarity should not mean that we fail to appreciate its originality.

Górecki became a household name when a recording of his Third Symphony was released in 1992, but his extensive output also includes orchestral and concertante works, chamber music and choral pieces. Of his *4 Preludes* (1955), his earliest published work, Nos. 1 and 4 are the most turbulent. The first is based on emphatic and relentless quaver-passages, contrasting with much more lyrical sections. The final piece is a *perpetuum mobile* of increasing intensity.

This second *Prelude* from Book I of *The Well-tempered Clavier* is also a *moto perpetuo* in character. The short cadenza near the close reminds us of Bach's legendary skill as an improviser.

Rachmaninov's *Prelude Op. 23 No. 5* is another of the composer's most frequently played piano works. Its heroic, march-like opening section gives way to a lyrical middle section of melancholy character. The tempo gradually accelerates into the return of the opening.

Wonderfully diverse in character, Chopin's *Preludes* constitute one of the most poetically expressive and concentrated sets of pieces in the entire piano repertoire. The gloomy, harmonically ambiguous No. 2 contrasts powerfully with both the joyful and buoyant No. 1 and the cascading semiquavers of No. 3. The achingly poignant fourth prelude is followed by the exuberance of No. 5, then the elegiac sixth with its left-hand melody of widely spaced intervals.

The very brief No. 7 is a gentle mazurka, also familiar in its *Les Sylphides* ballet version. The eighth prelude, with a turbulent, swirling texture, again contrasts powerfully with the ninth prelude's solemn, hymn-like character and powerful bass line. One of the shortest preludes is No. 10, its phrases alternately brilliant and measured. No. 11 is light and graceful, whereas the following prelude has a whirlwind of notes accompanied by left-hand chords. The serene No. 13, one of the longest, is followed by one of the stormiest, strange and disturbing. The acquired nickname of the 15th prelude – 'Raindrop' – is unhelpful; see above, the first piece in this recital. The virtuosic and tempestuous No. 16 – equally thrilling and terrifying – gives way to the tender and elegant 17th prelude, then another turbulent, even violent outpouring (No. 18). Although No. 19 is a bubbling *moto perpetuo*, it is also a perfect illustration of how beautifully Chopin exploits the piano's singing potential. Nos. 20 and 21 are, respectively, a dignified piece in funeral-march manner and an exercise in *cantabile* (singing). Following the agitated No. 22, with a mercurial change of mood, the penultimate piece of the set is of the utmost delicacy. The final prelude is passionate and restless, bringing to a close this all-encompassing sequence.

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