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Tonality as a Benchmark of Expression in Chopin's Op. 28 and Scriabin's Op. 11

The prelude – this improvisatory genre – has witnessed a spectacular evolution throughout the history of music, which has transformed it into a benchmark in the development of any pianist. The history of the prelude started when instrumentalists felt the need to “bring themselves up to key” (Rădulescu 2008: 446). Its evolution begins with simple improvisation, before reaching the condition of the quintessence of musical expression. Certainly, the evolution of the prelude cannot be followed without paying homage to Johann Sebastian Bach, with whom the prelude “often has the mission of warming up the fingers”, preceding the fugue – “which warmed up the mind” and this combination illustrates in the Well-Tempered Clavier one tonality at a time out of the 24.

Today we see that the prelude can still fully illustrate musical expression. From here on, I reserve the right of being subjective in pointing out a few ideas about tonality as a benchmark in the preludes Op. 28 by Chopin and Op. 11 by Scriabin. Why Chopin and Scriabin? Because the two bring back the piano prelude in its concert form.

In this manner, we can grasp two significant historical moments and two pivotal composers at the same time: one is Chopin and the other Scriabin; one embodies romanticism in its essence, the other, strongly influenced by Chopin during his first period of creation, nevertheless still has his own well defined style. Why together? Because the rebirth and crystallization of the Prelude is achieved through them. They stand for two milestones of the writing standard converging towards the same truth: the accomplished pianist gives birth to the music for the piano. Both the Preludes of Chopin and those

of Scriabin belong to a pianistic context in which the composers creatively express the level of their piano playing ability. As great pianists-composers, they actually imbue these Preludes with their own way of playing the piano: Chopin as an undisputable representative of pianistic *bel canto*, and Scriabin as an outstanding master of color.

Ex. 1a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 1*, mm. 1-6.

C major by Chopin builds up a melodic line consisting of a series of seconds; this line is covered by a syncopated rhythm. What does all this mean to a pianist? It may be a cavalcade, some waves, an inner quiver, a burning desire and – why not – an opening as if an overture to the preludes to come.

Ex. 1b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 1*, mm. 1-4.

C major by Scriabin surprisingly structures a melodic series of seconds, wrapped in melodic cells of quintuplets which can be compared to a leitmotiv amplified by its repetitiveness. Could it be an answer to Chopin's C major



Ex. 2a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 2*, mm. 1-8.

A minor by Chopin brings in an ostinato, which induces a gloomy atmosphere; the actual melody that unfolds on this ostinato starts with a descending fourth, suggesting a deep regret, a huge emptiness of the soul – and the end of each phrase has a rhythm specific to a funeral march.



Ex. 2b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 2*, mm. 1-6.

A minor by Scriabin brings about a discourse in a ternary meter, with an accurately shaped melodic; could it represent, due to the tempo expressed by the climax of each motif, the sad memory of a Chopin waltz?



Ex. 3a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 3*, mm. 1-5.

G major by Chopin: the race of the sixteenths in the bass reveals Chopin's typically pearly writing and surprisingly serves here as an accompaniment to an airy, playful melodic line, of an almost Mozartian elegance; everything exudes freshness.

Ex. 3b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 3*, mm. 1-3.

G major by Scriabin: another type of race with pearly writing, covering the leading melodic line, which is hardly emphasized and becomes secondary. Here G major is much like a lively, fresh color!

Ex. 4a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 4*, mm. 1-3.

E minor by Chopin draws our attention to the harmonic qualities of the piano: the chord accompaniment in bass offers a consistent change and metamorphosis for the cells, which make up the melody in soprano. This ongoing transformation induces a grave and at the same time unstable character by these continuous changes in the harmonic content.

Ex. 4b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 4*, mm. 1-3.

E minor by Scriabin: the nostalgic character suggested by the descending chromatics is embodied by the musicality of a tenor. Surprisingly, we find that

the accompaniment is made up of chords in the *discant*. There is a similarity to Chopin's E minor, at least as regards the chord accompaniment.

Allegro molto

Ex. 5a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 5*, mm. 1-6.

D major by Chopin: the oscillation and repetition of melodic shapes are the elements generating the musical discourse and which create an evolution. Using our imagination, we can see a natural landscape with “a tree full of song”.

Andante cantabile ♩ = 40

Ex. 5b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 5*, mm. 1-2.

D major by Scriabin gives the piano vocal features through the soprano singled from a choral, brilliantly combined with the melodic harmony of the bass which can represent a cello, with a candor and warmth typical of Chopin.

Lento assai

Ex. 6a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 6*, mm. 1-4.

B minor by Chopin: the coloring of the bass arpeggio is melancholic but not excessively so, and embodies a cello in its entire splendor; the fiddlestick manner is similar to that of a *spianato* song by a tenor-baritone. How wonderful is this “fiddlestick” that makes the piano strings vibrate!

Ex. 6b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 6*, mm. 1-5.

B minor by Scriabin: we witness a paradox of pianistic expression, namely the discourse structures octaves in *stretto*. The unfolding of these octaves apparently develops a large ambitus, but the melody that flows from the embrace of these octaves is made of seconds and thirds. Certainly, Scriabin wanted to double both the pace of the soprano and the bass. This is a very interesting instance of octaves on the keyboard.

Ex. 7a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 7*, mm. 1-7.

A major by Chopin is made up of two phases. “Such a small thing, yet so many meanings” (Dimulescu 2008: 136). It depends on the player’s mood: will we get a waltz or will we get a mazurka?

Ex. 7b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 7*, mm. 1-2.

A major by Scriabin: the three sound levels that illustrate the A major give us trouble with regard to their importance – which is the more interesting? The soprano with a melody “in sight”, the bass with its octave leaps, or the inner

movement of the sixteenths, which is rather irregular? The sound effect however gives the pianist the freedom to imagine a corner of Andalusia . . .

Molto agitato

Ex. 8a. *Chopin, Prelude Op. 28, No. 8, mm. 1-2.*

F# minor by Chopin: at first sight, this prelude seems a continuation of the first prelude. Yet what a big difference! We see here consistent restlessness and torment. This poly-melodies built up on the continuous modulation confers it a density of experience and perception.

Allegro agitato ♩ = 132

Ex. 8b. *Scriabin, Prelude Op. 11, No. 8, mm. 1-5.*

F# minor by Scriabin: the appearance of a classical type structure, with square phrases, could be deceiving . . . Scriabin's genius is coloring these four measure phrases with two elements: the kaleidoscope generated by the leaps exceeding the octave, with connotes questions, while the answer is a descending melodic pace to the soprano – accompanied by the harmonic unfolding of the bass!

Largo

Ex. 9a. *Chopin, Prelude Op. 28, No. 9, mm. 1-2.*

E major by Chopin: it is very interesting how Chopin exploits the medium register of the piano to the maximum without exceeding the sphere of Middle C (as regards the *discant* melodic line). The ambitus is rather large (reaching four octaves). The dotted and double dotted rhythm of the melodic line suggests a rather festive and theatrical event.

9. **Andantino** $\text{♩} = 66$
rubato
mf
p
cresc.

Ex. 9b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 9*, mm. 1-5.

E major with Scriabin: a confession-like duet, at first glance, which turns into a poly-melodic structure by the importance of the third plane . . .

10. **Allegro molto**
leggero
cresc.

Ex. 10a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 10*, mm. 1-6.

C# minor by Chopin brings in two dancing characters – one in a descending whirlwind spiral, the other suggesting a mazurka.

10.

Andante $\text{♩} = 96-100$

rituato

pp *mf* *pp*

Ex. 10b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 10*, mm. 1-8.

C# minor by Scriabin: Scriabin implores (through the descending steps of the soprano eights) and imposes in the median plane by the stressed figure of the minor second. The tension reaches a climax in *fortississimo* on the same coordinates, but with the bass doubled in octaves, enlarging the ambitus.

11.

Vivace

legato

Ex. 11a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 11*, mm. 1-5.

B major by Chopin: the *bel canto* character of the melody can be equally beautiful transposed for a coloratura soprano and for a violin. The ambient offered by the bass accompaniment is generously built on arpeggios which offers concord.

Ex. 11b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 11*, mm. 1-3.

B major by Scriabin is one of the preludes with a striking Chopinian character. Like with Chopin's B major, we notice the same accompaniment unfolding arpeggios; a truly vocal line of soprano with a *spianato* type phrase, urging you to support its long breath. Similarly, the inner voices are stressed in view of completing and coloring the musical discourse.

Ex. 12a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 12*, mm. 1-4.

G# minor with Chopin is a *toccare* type cavalcade, with repeated notes and a lot of chromatics bestowing on it instability and restlessness – the accents and leaps of the bass octaves come to increase the tension which reaches a climax only to then fade away . . .

Ex. 12b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 12*, mm. 1-4.

G# minor with Scriabin reveals a mysterious character and is an exquisite exercise of color through sound – we can imagine a diffuse light with countless nuances . . . could it be the mist descending on the banks of the Neva River?

Ex. 13a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 13*, mm. 1-3.

F# major with Chopin takes us into the eternity of the blue sky. Far away, church bells are tolling . . .

Ex. 13b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 13*, mm. 1-5.

Gb major with Scriabin: objectively, the same two black keys, the same major third, but how different they are: two worlds apart; I am, of course, referring to the superior third in the opening chord of Chopin's *discant* F# – A#, and to Scriabin's Gb and Bb – and from here on, the coloring has its say by enharmonic.

Ex. 14a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 14*, mm. 1-3.

E♭ minor by Chopin can be perceived only in close connection to the last part of the Sonata with funeral march (B♭ minor, Op.35). While there the imagination suggests the wind whistling through the dry leaves of a graveyard, here our fantasy carries us on the waves of a stormy sea . . .

14. **Presto** ♩ = 69-72

Ex. 14b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 14*, mm. 1-2.

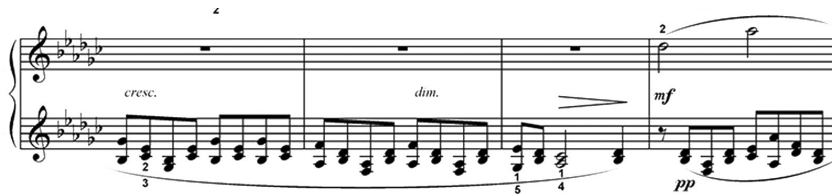
E♭ minor by Scriabin: the musical discourse is very dense and tense, suggesting a struggle. Is it a struggle of the unleashed powers of nature?

15. **Sostenuto**

Ex. 15a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 15*, mm. 1-4.

D♭ major by Chopin: the rhythmic consistency of eights on which D♭ major is built on can have several interpretative connotations: it builds up and strains the discourse, which in its climax induces the pulsation of the eights in octaves, and the bass line – which turns into the leading melody. The constant pulsation of the eights can also support the values and long phrases. The constant pace on eighths can be an ostinato . . . and we could go on . . .

15. **Lento** ♩ = 60-76



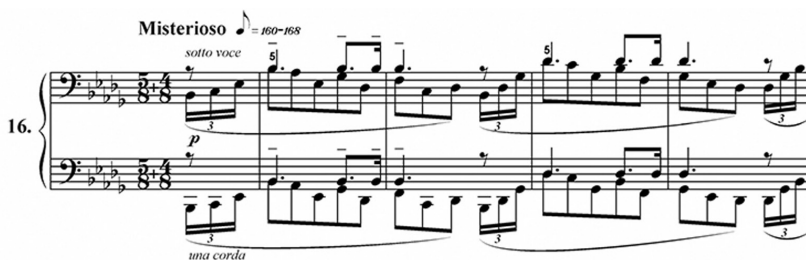
Ex. 15b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 15, mm. 1-9.*

Db major by Scriabin starts with a search. Soprano is fully missing in the first eight measures and what happens with the two parallel voices suggests the existence of a prelude to the prelude. The moment at which the soprano intones the melody, which is then taken over by the tenor towards the end, suggests a meditation, an introspection.



Ex. 16a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 16, mm. 1-2.*

Bb minor by Chopin: here comes the pianistic virtuosity in all its glory! On the one side we have the brilliant and dizzying pace of the sixteenths traversing almost the whole keyboard, and on the other side the obsessive bass rhythm, with the spectacular leaps of octaves and chords. All this can take your breath away!



Ex. 16b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 16, mm. 1-4.*

B \flat minor by Scriabin corresponds to the funeral march of the B \flat minor sonata by Chopin. The difference lies in the meter the musical discourse is built upon. With Chopin this is clearly a binary one, typical of any march, while with Scriabin we have alternative measures of five with four beats, which secures a constant asymmetry, making us think of the phantasmagoric . . .

Ex. 17a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 17*, mm. 1-5.

A \flat major by Chopin – the perfume of a love song at midnight. The soprano's melodic line brings in phrases that could stand for the lines of a wonderful poem. The last stanza of the prelude brings in the bass plane an A \flat which is repeated 11 times together with the final chord, suggesting the beat of a pendulum at midnight.

Ex. 17b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 17*, mm. 1-3.

A \flat major by Scriabin reminds us of Chopin in waltz steps. It has only 12 measures where we find two types of motives: a melodic one, enriched by an accompaniment of chromatic descending chords, and the other rhythmical, an off-beat of waltz character.

Ex. 18a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 18*, mm. 1-2.

F minor by Chopin: this is a moment when the declamation is fully revealed! Its instances are: the recitative, the cadence of expression and virtuosity amplified by the utterance in unison, in a pianistic sense.

Ex. 18b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 18*, mm. 1-4.

F minor by Scriabin is defined by accumulation. It accumulates intensity, it accumulates tension, and it accumulates density – the whole thing blowing up in a six octaves ambitus.

Ex. 19a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 19*, mm. 1-4.

E \flat major by Chopin: the historical precedents of E \flat major will make us think of Beethoven's Heroic and Imperial and yet Chopin's E \flat major seems to come from another galaxy, offering a completely different timbre connotation to this tonality of a brilliance, a perfume and an elegance in its intimacy which

have nothing to do with the glamour and majestic pace of the heroic and imperial character.

Ex. 19b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 19*, mm. 1-3.

E \flat major by Scriabin: let us not forget that Scriabin was in a consistent pianistic competition with Rachmaninoff. Certainly, this tonality inspired him to write in the style of his rival.

Ex. 20a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 20*, mm. 1-4.

C minor by Chopin: the expression of a procession, in a gloomy atmosphere is revealed by the consistently descending pace of the chords, with a pointed rhythm reminding us of a funeral march. Is it the sadness of a defeated Poland?

Ex. 20b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 20*, mm. 1-3.

C minor by Scriabin: an exuberant, exquisitely impulsive expression in a continuous tonal instability – it is only at the end that we realize it is a C minor.

Cantabile

21.

Ex. 21a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 21*, mm. 1-4.

Bb major by Chopin: a fairytale, a daydream, the floating of a simple melody in soprano, accompanied by a sonorous fluid bass. Can we think of a possible unreal? And if yes, then this certainly is a warm and gentle light.

Andante $\text{♩} = 108$

21.

Ex. 21b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 21*, mm. 1-4.

Bb major by Scriabin: it seems that this tonality has a peculiar color and lures us to transcend into the unreal. If Chopin's unreal can be perceived as "close", Scriabin's unreal is somewhere floating far away . . .

Molto agitato

22.

Ex. 22a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 22*, mm. 1-3.

G minor with Chopin: a scream in the storm – the octaves sequences with anacrusis in bass plane opposed to the off-beats in *discant* plane suggest this image and create a special dramatic effect.

Ex. 22b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 22, mm. 1-4.*

G minor with Scriabin: a romance in duet, but of course, the romance is only a pretext for such an elevated expression of the free spirit.

Ex. 23a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 23, mm. 1-2.*

F major by Chopin: the image of a nymph playing in the crystal clear waters of a spring – the pace of the sixteenths of *discant* embodies the fluid while the interventions in the tenor plane represent a game.

Ex. 23b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 23, mm. 1-4.*

F major by Scriabin: Scriabin's pianistic diversity proposes an imaginative exercise – all these melodic turns of phrase of the *discant* do nothing else but draw arabesques.

Allegro appassionato

24.

Ex. 24a. Chopin, *Prelude Op. 28, No. 24*, mm. 1-7.

D minor with Chopin: how spectacular, how dramatic? And all of this is dashing across the entire keyboard!

Presto ♩ = 100

24.

Ex. 24b. Scriabin, *Prelude Op. 11, No. 24*, mm. 1-4.

D minor with Scriabin: the repetition of the chords and their almost obsessive increase lead the musical discourse to a consistent growth of intensity and tension. It is a perpetual turmoil and anguish that ends this cycle.

*

As I have promised at the beginning of this essay, I have tried to highlight a few ideas about tonality as an objective element and about my opinions as a subjective one. Certainly, these ideas can be further developed and elaborated or disputed. However, I remain in the instance where the piano player wanted to convey in words what he or she was transmitting by sounds. Let us not forget that the role of an interpreter is to always discover the musical expression that reveals the artistic.

English version revised by Dragoș Manea

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