Dissertation
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The “Mastery of the Romantic Fragment”
Chopin’s Préludes, Op. 28

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BY

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Richard Taruskin states, “no composer ever exceeded Chopin’s mastery of the romantic fragment.” Indeed, Chopin’s output consists overwhelmingly of “character pieces” of which the majority may be regarded as miniature compositions. Despite the assertive tone of Taruskin’s appraisal, views such as this have often carried a negative connotation: his “mastery” of the short piece was at the expense of great, large-scale compositions in the tradition of his Classical predecessors such as Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn, the perceived benchmark against which subsequent composers should be compared. Yet as Landomy remarked over 80 years ago, “within their narrow limits, [the miniatures] contain a universe… The shortest may be the most profound and poignant, the most dramatic and the greatest in all respects.”

The focus of this study is Chopin’s Préludes, Opus 28, completed in 1839 during his time in Majorca. With Préludes in every key, Chopin followed the model of J.S. Bach (though the tonal ordering differs) whose two volumes of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* were brought to Spain. The pieces are quite remarkable for their innovative and enigmatic nature; critics and scholars have long been puzzled by the title — as Gide famously asked “Préludes to what?” This issue of genre and title will be returned to shortly; it is of central concern to the scholar and informs the direction of one’s study of Op. 28. Landomy was referring to the Préludes, amongst other works, and one can read into his comment a challenge for whoever wishes to engage with the music. That is, to put aside any prejudices of what constitutes a great work and discover the “universe” that is located in each of the small works, even if it is a mere twelve bars in length (Op. 28, No. 9 in E). This is not to say that one should seek a ‘real’ universe, per se. Chopin had no interest in programmatic references in his work and thus those who attempt to interpret various elements of Op. 28 as the relentless raindrops on the roof of the monastery, for example, are swayed too much by popular myth. As Jeremy Siepmann points out, there is evidence that much of Op.

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2 Ibid., 350.
28 was completed before Chopin even arrived at Majorca, further dispelling any explicit connections between the location and the music.⁶ What one finds in these pieces is a rich harmonic language, an infusion of Polish character and writing that draws out and manipulates every shade of pianistic colour. These features permeate Op. 28 in a manner that is unique to each Prélude; this is the “universe” that Landormy compels us to find.

Genre, Structure and Form

Arguably, the primary aesthetic issue concerning Op. 28 is, in a broad sense of the word, the structure. Should the Préludes be considered as 24 parts that combine to create a unified whole? If this were the case, one would be tempted to identify features that link the Préludes — motifs, harmonic progressions, perhaps even an overarching structure that develops as the set unfolds. The other view is that Op. 28 exists in name only, so to speak; that is, the 24 Préludes that constitute the ‘set’ are all individual works in the same way that there are 32 distinct and separate Beethoven Piano Sonatas (ignoring that the Sonatas have multiple movements). To address this question, it is necessary to return to Chopin’s times and examine the contextual and aesthetic ideas that shaped his Op. 28.

James Meuthen-Campbell acknowledges that this issue has been distorted somewhat since the composer’s death, in part because of the advent of recording technology. Although the record makes it easy for a wider audience to listen to Chopin, it has been “vogue” for pianists to record complete sets of works — all 27 Etudes, all 24 Préludes, the four Ballades, and so forth. This may be the consequence of the commercialization and commodification of music, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century; it is surely easier to market a recording titled “The Complete…” than one consisting of a mélange of various genres. To create sets, in this way, of Chopin’s pieces is a mistake for two reasons. It first ignores the fact that there are often no significant features to unite works of the same name, aside from the self-evident characteristics such as the 3/4 time signature common to the “Waltzes.” Second, it ignores the context in which the works were originally conceived. It is the latter idea that is of crucial importance to Op. 28.

The concert, as an event, expanded greatly in the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution and consequent dissemination of wealth was a significant factor in the changing demographic of the audience, from a relatively exclusive upper-class to including the emerging middle-class. At the same time, composers were relying less on patronage and turned to the concert as a means for securing their income. Its

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changing nature had an impact on the repertoire performed. Pianists most frequently took part in their own ‘benefit’ concerts (compared to one organised by an orchestral society) in which one or more large-scale works — concerto, variations, fantasy, rondo — would be played. This leads to the role of the prélude as part of the programme.

The title ‘Prélude’ suggests something to follow and this was precisely what occurred in the Romantic era concert. The short, improvisatory pieces primarily functioned as introductions to the large-scale works that succeeded them; they also had the utilitarian purpose of “ascertaining the qualities of the pianoforte, perhaps unfamiliar to him [the pianist]” according to Czerny. The pieces did not contain much thematic or motivic development; rather, the primary goal of the music was harmonically related — that is, either ending in the same key as, or on the dominant seventh of the piece that followed. Therefore, it was common for composers to write préludes in all major and minor keys, creating a sort of bank, from which the pianist could select the appropriate piece for the occasion.

Towards the end of the 1830s, other genres began to appear in the concert repertoire, namely short character pieces and stylized dances. Chopin (although not a prolific concert-giver compared to Liszt, for example) followed this trend as is evident from his programmes during the 1840s until his death. All his concerts featured at least one large-scale work, such as a ballade or a scherzo, which was complemented by blocks of miniatures — exemplified in his chamber recital on 16 February, 1848 in which the second section opens with “Scherzo, Adagio et Finale de la Sonate en sol mineur pour piano et violoncelle” and ends with “Préludes, Mazurkas et Valses.”

Similarly, a programme from 1842 lists Chopin as playing a “Suite de Nocturnes, Préludes, et Études.” There are two conclusions to be drawn from these observations.

9 Ibid., pp. 17-21.
First, Chopin appeared to have no intention of performing Op. 28 as a set; rather, he selected individual Préludes that would accompany a selection of other character pieces. Second, Chopin distanced himself somewhat from the generic function of the prélude which was to serve as an introduction to a large-scale work. By partnering Préludes with other short works, Chopin cast doubt on their purpose; certainly, the “suite” of character pieces was subservient to the major work, however, they gain a sense of autonomy by having their own ‘place’ in the programme. Kallberg argues that the endings of the Op. 28 Préludes point to this ambiguity. This detail will be examined more closely later; at present, it is suffice to say that the endings hover between openness (such as a dominant seventh) that may lead into another work, and complete closure that may be expected of a stand-alone concert work.

Liszt remarked that the Préludes “are not only, as the title might make one think, pieces destined to be played in the guise of introductions to other pieces; they are poetic preludes.” Whereas Schumann considered them remarkable, but “all disorder and wild confusion”, it seems that Liszt understood the true nature of Op. 28 and Chopin’s subversion of the prélude’s generic conventions. Jim Samson states that a “genre behaves like a contract between…composer and listener.” Central to the “contract” is the title of a work and its relationship with the musical content. Because genres rely on interaction between the composer and the audience, they are considered more “malleable” than a style or a form. Consequently, a composer may subvert the generic expectations and conventions, if there is sufficient understanding of the correspondence between the title and the work. Without being weighed down by genre theory, one can see how this applies to Chopin’s Op. 28.

By composing Préludes that do not strictly lead into another work and have their own autonomous characteristics, along with ambiguous ideas of closure, Chopin undermined the expectations that arrive with the title. However, with their improvisatory nature — virtuosic and rapid figuration, contrasting timbral effects and sudden and distant harmonic movement — and relative brevity, the Op. 28 Préludes have sufficient musical features to locate them within the genre. Indeed, a

15 Ibid., 139.
16 Ibid., 133.
process of this sort can be related to much of Chopin’s output [consider the ‘creation’ of the ballade, the transformation of the mazurka, the development of the nocturne]. It is thus understandable that Samson reaches the conclusion that Chopin’s Préludes are works with “conventional titles, [but] newly defined.”

The brevity of the individual Préludes has seemingly posed the greatest intellectual problem for performers and academics since Chopin’s time. This, according to Kallberg, derives from the misunderstanding of the term “form”; that is, the belief that a statement such as “Chopin was a master of small forms” refers to structural forms (where “structural” concerns the “musical plan”). Abraham typifies this position when he states that much of Chopin’s work is “formally weak” and barely extends beyond the “elementary formula [of] ABA.” As Kallberg goes on to point out, structural form was considered a technique in the composer’s arsenal but was relatively ignored in terms of then contemporary music criticism and analysis (compared to nowadays). It was only in the 1840s that such ideas begin to take hold; by comparison, it was the generic form, concerning the defining musical features of the prélude, that was of greater relevance to Chopin’s audiences and critics.

Because the Préludes are “small” and rely on what Abraham describes as an “elementary” structural form, there is a temptation to consider Op. 28 as an integral set with the hope that the perceived structural weakness can be overlooked. Such a position betrays an inherent bias towards the larger and longer forms — which will only lead to, in Abraham’s words, a “fantastically unfair” comparison with Beethoven — and, more importantly, ignores and avoids the meaning of “form” as was recognized by Chopin and his contemporaries. Kallberg concludes that Chopin presented his audiences with a challenge in Op. 28 which succeeding generations of performers and scholars have by and large failed to meet. He implores us to put aside the modern preoccupation with structural form and consider the contextual and generic issues that influenced the composition of Op. 28. In doing so, one arrives at the conclusion that Op. 28 constitutes a ‘whole’ only to the extent that the complete

22 Gerald Abraham, Chopin’s Musical Style (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 44.
24 Abraham, Chopin’s Musical Style, 44.
set is marked by “complementary generic characteristics” and is “integrated by the
tonal logic of their ordering.”26 More importantly, there is no musical progression
throughout Op. 28 that would create a large-scale structure and therefore one can
regard each individual Prélude as a self-contained work, which should be performed,
analysed and listened to on its own terms.

This conclusion has been laboured somewhat because it ultimately affects the
direction of the study of Op. 28. My aim is to discern the salient musical features that
mark the Préludes and present these ‘findings’ under the umbrellas of various
musical categories, namely, harmony, rhythm and the idea of closure (which is
closely related to the earlier discussion of genre). It is evident that there are musical
features that permeate Op. 28; indeed, it appears that the uncertain idea of genre is
reflected in the harmonically and rhythmically ambiguous elements of the music.
This approach may seem to defy the point made by Kallberg. I am examining
features of the Préludes as they appear in the whole of Op. 28; but to consider
them as a set is to imply that there is a causal relationship between the musical
elements from one Prélude to the next. No such claim is made though and therefore I
assert that the challenge laid down by Kallberg concerning Op. 28 has been accepted.

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(accessed 30 August, 2010).
Historical Background to Opus 28

By way of further introduction to the music, it is appropriate to briefly examine Chopin’s biographical details and any relationship these may have with Op. 28. In some ways, such a task is futile. As Landormy observes, Chopin’s “concern for moderation and perfection alike, for a certain reserve and modesty in the expression of the emotions, is not usual in a true romantic.” Furthermore, Willard Palmer states, “Chopin did not regard himself as a romantic composer…[and] disliked the word “romanticism”.” It would appear unlikely then that Chopin would “reveal the world in expressing himself” through his music, in accordance with Samson’s definition of “Romanticism.” Nonetheless, it remains pertinent to at least introduce some of the wider context.

In late 1838, Chopin and George Sand departed for Majorca, hoping to enjoy the favourable climate of the Mediterranean. Prior to leaving, Chopin pre-sold the Op. 28 Préludes, most of which were near completion, to Camille Pleyel for 2,000 francs. Although he was anxious about leaving Paris for an extended period, Adam Zamoyski contends that he “could not resign himself to letting this woman [Sand]…go off and leave him alone” and so he borrowed the required money and arranged for a piano to be shipped to him. Initially, the trip was disastrous — the piano was slow to arrive and Chopin’s health deteriorated with the advent of inclement weather. The doctors mistakenly diagnosed Chopin with tuberculosis; as a result, the Spanish authorities required that the “tuberculotic” house had to be evacuated. Chopin, Sand and her children subsequently moved into the Valldemosa monastery, “the most romantic spot on earth” according to Sand. Chopin’s health slowly improved and in January 1839, he completed the manuscript of Op. 28. It would be poetically fitting if the “most romantic spot on earth” should provide the backdrop for the music composed by the man who has come to be regarded as the

31 Ibid., 164.
32 Ibid., 164.
“quintessence of romanticism”\textsuperscript{33} but such a connection seems untenable. One can only conclude that the Spanish sojourn, the time away from Paris, created the space for Chopin to complete Op. 28, rather than having any discernible influence on the compositional process.

\textsuperscript{33} Palmer, “The Preludes of Frédéric Chopin, Opus 28,” 4.
Chopin’s Harmonic Language

Like many of his Romantic-era contemporaries, Chopin’s harmony remains largely within a diatonic and functional framework but is frequently embellished by chromaticism. Abraham argues this creates much of the “charm” of his music.\textsuperscript{34} The relationship between diatonic and chromatic harmonic elements varies greatly in Chopin’s writing — at times, the chromaticism merely enhances the diatonic progressions; elsewhere, the diatonic progressions are contained within a highly chromatic modulation scheme; elsewhere again, harmonic progressions are founded on the succession of identical chords in a sequence, such as consecutive seventh chords. Op. 28 thus embodies a wide range of the harmonic spectrum and I have selected a range of examples that demonstrate this variety.

The following examination of Chopin’s harmonic language appears less comprehensive than other contemporary analyses, given the absence of any Schenkerian graphs. That said, some of the harmonic features discussed, such as large-scale key areas within the work and underlying harmonic movement within phrases, are similar to those that Schenkerian analysis would uncover. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that in some instances, identifying particular harmonies and their function can be quite a challenge; as Abraham notes, Chopin presented “progressions in the sketchiest of skeleton forms” and wrote “in convenient rather than grammatically correct notation.”\textsuperscript{35} Some of the harmonic descriptions and conclusions presented are potentially subjective and thus open to alternative interpretations.

Op. 28, No. 1 in C provides an appropriate starting point because it presents few harmonic challenges and is confined definitively to a C major framework. The harmony unfolds in an arpeggiated figure with a constant pulse of one harmony per bar. Simon Finlow postulates an explicit connection between Chopin’s Op. 10, No. 1 “Etude in C,” and Bach’s C major Prélude from Book One of the Well-Tempered Clavier.\textsuperscript{36} As suggested in Figure 1, it is apparent that Chopin paid homage to Bach in Op. 28, No. 1 as well, given the similarities in harmonic design and figuration.

\textsuperscript{34} Abraham, Chopin’s Musical Style, 77.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 79.
This is hardly unexpected considering Chopin’s admiration of Bach, whose music he had been acquainted with since his childhood.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, in a letter addressed to his copyist Julian Fontana dated 28 December, 1838, Chopin describes his working environment as containing “Bach [as earlier noted, possibly \textit{The Well-Tempered Clavier}], my scrawls and (not my) waste paper…”\textsuperscript{38} Given the date on the letter, one can deduce that Chopin’s “scrawls” refers to, amongst others, the Préludes, further emphasising a connection between the two composers.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Op. 28, No. 1 and Bach’s Prelude in C major\textsuperscript{40}}
\end{figure}

Within the first eight-bar phrase of Op. 28, No. 1, the bass moves upwards from tonic to dominant outlining a conventional I-iii\textsuperscript{7}_b-V\textsuperscript{7}_b/V-V\textsuperscript{7} progression leading

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Robert W. Watson, “Two Bach Preludes/Two Chopin Etudes, or \textit{Toujours travailler Bach-ce sera votre meilleur},” \textit{Music Theory Spectrum} 24, no. 1 (2002), 103.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Frédéric Chopin, \textit{Chopin’s Letters}, collected by Henryk Opieński, ed. and trans. E.L. Voynich (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988), 188.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Performance markings are taken from Frédéric Chopin, \textit{Preludes, Opus 28}, A Norton Critical Score, ed. Thomas Higgins (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), pp. 11-56.
\item \textsuperscript{40} J.S. Bach, \textit{Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues: Book I}, ed. Donald Francis Tovey, fingered Harold Samuel (London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1924), 24.
\end{itemize}
into a perfect cadence at bars 8-9. The second phrase begins in similar fashion before leading into an ascent lasting 13 bars, in which the bass moves up the C major scale, starting on E to eventually reach G and the structural dominant at bar 24. The bass movement is predominantly supported by diatonic harmonies though often in inverted form to avoid a sense of completion and maintain the harmonic tension that drives the passage. For example, at bars 18-19, the bass moves from B-C, obviously a return to the tonic; however, the interrupted cadence of $V_b\text{-}vi_7_b$ ensures that the stability of the tonic remains the goal of the phrase. The increasing harmonic tension is complemented by added chromatic notes in the melody and the use of secondary dominant chords to precede the subdominant harmonies and the Ic-$V^7_I$ cadence at bars 23-25. This is a standard technique though, and does not destabilize the sense of key; if anything, it increases the impetus of the harmonic progression towards the tonic.

The C major Prélude provides an excellent example of a straightforward harmonic structure in which there is a simple and logical progression from I to V in each phrase by step-wise motion in the bass. Op. 28, No. 11 in B is similarly simple in its harmonic design — the primary point of colouration is an unexpected dominant seventh chord of the submediant in the coda. In terms of tension and resolution, though, No. 11 follows conventional harmonic practices. The more notable feature is the phrase structure; whereas Op. 28, No. 1 shifted from tonic to dominant, No. 11 places the dominant harmony in the antecedent phrase which resolves into the tonic chord in the consequent phrase. It is the rhythmic variation that provides the impetus here; this point will be considered later. In the middle section, following a progression to G# minor, there is an expectation of a return to the tonic. B major is presented in bar 14, but it is not until bar 15, when the initial theme is re-presented over a dominant harmony, that the listener gains a strong sense of ‘returning home’ because one is aware that this phrase will lead to the tonic. Such a description of tension and release should not be overstated — it does take place over the course of only seven bars. That said, the harmonic placement within the phrase leads to a perception on the listener’s behalf that the dominant harmony provides the stable indicator of the tonic key, a feature that is, if not counter-intuitive, then perhaps in theoretical opposition to harmonic convention.
Op. 28, No. 3 in G outlines a simple tonal design which is embellished by slightly ambiguous surface harmonies. Comparable to No. 1 in C, the accompaniment consists of rapid figuration in the left hand which, in this example, departs and returns to the bass note each bar in a balanced and symmetrical manner.

![Figure 2. Op. 28, No. 3 in G, left hand figuration, bars 1-2](image)

Following the opening tonic harmony (which lasts for the first six bars), there is a move to the dominant, which is emphasised by an applied dominant in root position. Having cadenced back into G major, the tonic chord then transforms into a dominant seventh, briefly tonicizing C major at bar 18. This begins a preparation for the structural dominant that arrives at bar 25. In this eight-bar phrase, one can see Chopin’s blurring of harmonic description, though in a relatively elementary manner. Already in the V-I cadence of the first section (bars 11-12), the dominant chord included an E, as a 9-8 appoggiatura, which seemed to derive from the presence of the second and sixth degrees of the scale in the accompaniment figure. The E does not mask the dominant chord but adds a certain colour by emphasising briefly a V⁹ chord.

This idea of colouration is likewise present from bars 20-25, in which the melody begins a descent from C to G. In bars 20-23, this descent is supported by an accompaniment that maintains a C in the bass.
Based on the earlier figuration, one could be inclined to label all four bars as a subdominant harmony. The only change in the left-hand part is from F§ to F# which raises the expectation that the music is returning to G. The chordal melody however, suggests a IVmaj⁷ in bar 22 followed by either a ii⁷ or IV⁶ harmony. The choice is arbitrary either way given that both theoretically function as dominant approach chords, which is exactly what occurs here. The example, though, does provide a precursor for some of Chopin’s ambiguous harmonic language that leaves the analyst in doubt regarding both name and function.

From the early Romantic period, composers began to experiment with modulations away from the tonic to key areas other than the dominant, as had been conventional during the Classical period. In Op. 28, Chopin demonstrates a propensity for modulating to the mediant or submediant (and especially the flattened degrees of those notes). Despite Chopin’s aversion to the “melodrama” of his music, one could point to Schubert as a possible influence on this technique. Because the flattened mediant or submediant keys do not ‘belong’ to the tonic key, it is peritent to examine the methods by which Chopin effects these modulations.

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42 In this context, one could possibly replace Schubert with Beethoven, who also experimented with keys related a third apart as in his Piano Sonata in C major, Op. 53, “Waldstein”; there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that Chopin had a distaste for Beethoven’s music yet it was likely that he was regularly exposed to his Beethoven’s compositions, suggesting that a potential influence should not necessarily be downplayed. See Wayne C. Petty, “Chopin and the Ghost of Beethoven,” 19th-Century Music 22, no. 3 (1999), pp. 281-299.
Op. 28, No. 15 in Db achieves contrast in the B section through a modulation from Db to a dual tonality of C# minor and E major. The repetitive Ab that permeates the entire piece acts as a unifying feature between the sections and allows Chopin to manipulate it enharmonically. The A section concludes at Bar 28 with an Ab\(^7\) chord *sans* third, leaving the listener with a sense of harmonic ambiguity leading into the B section. Across the barline, the key signature changes from five flats to four sharps and the left hand opens with chords underneath the monotonous G# (rewritten from Ab). Although the third is initially missing from the harmony, there is a strong indication of C# minor, the enharmonic equivalent of the tonic minor.

![Figure 4. Op. 28, No. 15, transition from Db to C# minor/E major, bars 27-29](image)

From bar 36, the repeated G# is played in octaves, anticipating a point of release in the music. At bar 41, the left hand lands triumphantly on an E signaling a modulation to the relative major of C# minor. This shift is reinforced by the repeated octaves in the right hand which move up to a B. This is to be expected given the established pattern that the repeated note be the fifth degree of the ‘tonic’ scale. Although E is technically an augmented second above Db, it is enharmonically the flattened mediant (the same as Fb). Therefore, the technique used to modulate from Db to E is relatively simple: Chopin uses the repeated Ab as a pivot note to modulate to the enharmonic tonic minor which seamlessly progresses to E, its relative major. The return passage to Db major similarly manipulates the enharmonic relationships between Db and C# minor. After a transition phrase following the period in E major, the harmony oscillates between C#m\(^6\) and G# chords. Such a progression appears to tonicize G# through the use of a repeated iv\(^6\)-I cadence, typical of the Romantic
period. The G# is, however, reinterpreted as an Ab at bar 76 leading to a dominant seventh that effects a smooth modulation back to Db major.

Chopin further explores keys a third apart in Op. 28, No. 9 in E, though to a much greater extent than No. 15 in Db, leading Arthur Hedley to conclude it is “one of the darkest pieces ever written in the bright key of E major.” After the opening four-bar phrase which remains in the tonic key, the harmony moves unexpectedly to a G major chord — I-V-bIII — which is achieved through a repeated B in the upper voice of the right hand chords. The ensuing passage avoids a stable tonic key — F major (as bII of E major) is certainly suggested, in which case bars 5-6 would read as outlined in Figure 5.

![Figure 5. Op. 28, No. 9, analysis of modulation, bars 5-6](image)

**Figure 5. Op. 28, No. 9, analysis of modulation, bars 5-6**

In bar 7, the bass line continues its descent (the beginnings of which can be seen in the above example) leading to inverted harmonies that can still be located within an F major framework. On the final beat of bar 7, the bass reaches Fb, supporting the notes Bb,Db and G in the right hand, creating a diminished seventh chord. If the Fb is read enharmonically as an E, then the diminished seventh chord would seem to be a vii\(^{o7}\) of F major (functioning as a V\(^{m6}\) without the root note, C). Chopin, however, exploits the symmetrical nature of the diminished seventh chord; that is, it can be rewritten enharmonically four times, with each variation functioning as a different leading-note chord. Therefore, as written in this context, the G\(^{o7}\) leads to Ab major, which duly arrives in second inversion on the first beat of bar 8. A perfect cadence

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onto Ab major follows; but no sooner than Ab major is established, the harmony
shifts to the tonic minor. The bass moves up an enharmonic third from Ab to B§ to
support the ‘Ab minor’ harmony which has been rewritten as G# minor — iii of E
major. The minor mediant quickly resolves into a dominant seventh and the music
has found its way back into E major.

Figure 6. Op. 28, No. 9, return to E major, bars 7-9

The final four bars again contain chromatic modulation; the minor subdominant of E
is used as a pivot chord that leads to F major before progressing up to G, which is
briefly tonicized in bar 11. The bass then rises from G to B to support a final perfect
cadence which closes the piece in E major. Thus concludes quite an extraordinary
example of chromatic harmony in which a new key is seemingly found every bar
without appearing unnatural or arbitrary. Although the modulations fall outside the
conventional key areas, they can be explained by a harmonic motif of movement by
a third. This idea permeates the music at both a micro and macro level. Therefore,
the A major chord that appears out of place in bar 7 (the current ‘key’ is F major) can
be interpreted as dividing the progression from F to C (even though the harmonies
are inverted) into two thirds.

On a larger scale, the harmonic movement in bars 5-8 is from E major to a climactic
point in Ab major, passing through F major. This modulation, though, can be
considered subservient to the overall goal of reaching the dominant at the end of bar
8. Therefore, the long range movement from tonic to dominant is interrupted by a
moment of resolution in Ab, again dividing the interval of a fifth into two thirds.
This process is evident in the final phrase on a smaller scale, when G major, bIII,
provides an intermediate harmony between tonic and dominant. Aldwell and Schachter similarly conclude that in order to understand the harmonies of Op. 28, No. 9, it is necessary to distinguish between those which function conventionally in a local context and those which reflect the greater tonal plan— in this case, harmonic movement and modulation by a third.

The use of pivot notes and enharmonic relationships to effect modulations by a third is prominent in Op. 28, No. 17 in Ab. No. 17 is alike to Op. 28, No. 15 in its use of a repeated figure in the inner voice which, when combined with pivot notes, allows for seamless transitions between keys. The tonal structure of the Prélude can be indentified in terms of rondo form — the A sections are in Ab major; while the B and C sections modulate to E and B major respectively. The movement to E major at bars 18-19 (enharmonically, the flattened submediant) is achieved through the repetition of the Ab in the melody which is then rewritten as a G# and reharmonised by a new ‘tonic’ chord, E major.

![Figure 7. Op. 28, No. 17, modulation by pivot note to E major, bars 18-19](image)

A similar technique is employed at bars 42-43 but this time utilizing the repeated bass and tenor notes to effect a modulation up an enharmonic third to B major.

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Like the preceding example, the root of the initial chord, Eb, is reinterpreted as the third of the following chord, D#. The use of pivot notes allow for a smooth transition between the keys at both points in the piece. Although the ‘distance’ in conventional harmonic terms between Ab and the flattened submedian and mediant keys is substantial, it is not heard as such because of the common musical elements. The melody in the former example and the accompanying framework in the latter are used to create a unifying thread that connects the phrases. The final modulation back to Ab major also relies on this effect. The B major harmony in bar 54 is written as Cb major, bVI of Eb, that proceeds logically to a Ic harmony of the temporary tonic, Eb major, which is suggested through a repeated iv-I cadence from bars 55-60. From bars 61-64, the Eb harmony is maintained by a repeated chord in the inner voices, which leads as expected to Ab major at bar 65. Therefore, the return manipulates the same enharmonic and pivot relationships as had been utilized to move out of the tonic key. Furthermore, Chopin plays with the listener’s expectations by repeating the Eb chord without change for four bars; as this unexpectedly long phrase unfolds, the harmony appears less as a tonic (as was indicated from bars 55-60) and more as a dominant, thus aurally preparing the listener for the impending return to Ab major.

The Préludes discussed so far exhibit varying degrees of chromaticism and modulation to non-diatonic key areas. However, the harmony is still contained within a functional and relatively conventional framework — harmonic variety is created through the use of applied dominants, simple mixture chords, enharmonic pivot notes, and the manipulation of leading-note chords. There are moments in various Préludes of Op. 28, though, in which the functional role of harmonies is subordinated.
in favour of providing extra colour to the music, even if the large-scale design is based on traditional harmonic movement.

Op. 28, No. 4 in E minor provides an excellent example in which the harmony arises from the confluence of seemingly independent voices that move in semitones. The Prélude divides into two parallel sections (bars 1-12 and 13-25), each opening with a $i_b$ chord. The passages are underpinned by a descent in the bass voice from the opening G to the dominant. The tenor and alto parts follow the bass but do not move in tandem, resulting in a mix of major, minor, diminished, half-diminished and dominant seventh chords. Richard Parks sums up the dilemma for the analyst by pointing out that “though the succession of sonorities is fascinating, one searches in vain for an explanation through harmony.”\(^{45}\) Instead, Parks argues that one must be guided by the voice leading of each separate part within the tonic-dominant structure of E minor.\(^{46}\) Figure 9 highlights the difficulties of ascribing function to the harmony in the first four bars of Op. 28, No. 4.

Figure 9. Op. 28, No. 4, bars 1-4

The first bar is simple enough — the first inversion tonic chord is held throughout, if the C in the treble clef is considered as an upper neighbour note. But then how to describe the second bar? Certainly, the F#, A and E imply ii, first in half-diminished


\(^{46}\) Ibid., 193.
then in diminished seventh form. The B in the melody, on the other hand, suggests a dominant seventh in second inversion with a suspended fourth that resolves onto Eb (enharmonically D#) in the second half of the bar. This interpretation assumes, though, that the Eb (D#) should resolve upwards to E, if the chord is functioning as a dominant seventh. This never occurs and thus the analyst is left at an impasse. Continuing in such a manner as outlined above would only serve to reach the same problems at most bars. Abraham’s words sum up the analytical problem — one should not read the chromatic movement in Op. 28, No. 4 in terms of advanced functional harmonic theory but as reflective of the “profound and deepening gloom”\(^47\) that permeates the work.

Although much shorter, Op. 28, No. 21 in Bb likewise contains a passage in which the harmony proceeds on its own, as opposed to functional, terms. Having progressed out of Gb major (another example of modulation by a third), from bars 33-39, the music anticipates a momentous perfect cadence with a repeated F in the bass. This is complemented by an ascending melody in the treble; furthermore, the rich inner harmonies in successive bars outline the applied dominants and ‘tonics’ of the ascending scale degrees from tonic to subdominant (bars 33-34 outline a Bb major harmony; bar 35 outlines C minor; bar 37, D minor, and so forth). Instead of reaching the anticipated dominant, though, at bar 39, the harmony settles on the minor subdominant in the treble oscillating with an F underneath the chord.

\(^{47}\) Abraham, *Chopin’s Musical Style*, 82.
Figure 10. Op. 28, No. 21, return to Bb major, bars 39-45

At bar 41, there begins a chromatic from the Gb of the minor subdominant triad, proceeding through two octaves to the F of bar 44 that leads into a comparatively understated perfect cadence over the barline. A large-scale analysis would suggest that the dominant is reached at bar 35 and is then sustained for 12 bars. The Eb minor triad retains the seventh of the dominant (Eb from an F7 harmony) while the Gb and Bb are simply upper neighbour notes that resolve onto the F and A, respectively, of the dominant chord in bar 44.

Such an analysis, though, would miss entirely the remarkable descent which contains a selection of thirds, fifths, minor sixths, major sixths and augmented fourths. Furthermore, both hands play in unison (excepting the first and last quaver beats of bars 41 and 44, respectively), which renders it impossible to analyse the passage in terms of harmonic function. There is a discernible pattern in the upper voice of each diad — within each bar, the upper voice descends by a second, then a fifth, then ascends by step from the third to fifth quavers before descending a fourth. To complicate matters, though, the nature of the intervals are subject to change; the second in bar 41 is a semitone, the corresponding second in bar 42 is a tone.
This pattern is repeatedly sequentially, each bar a fifth lower than the previous one. The first notes in each bar of this passage descend from Eb (the root of the preceding harmony) in fifths to Gb (also contained within the preceding harmony and the upper neighbour note of the dominant), though postulating such relationships seems futile given the difficulty of actually hearing this sequence. The bass movement also detracts attention from the upper voice. In short, the constant semitone descent is not compatible with the undulating shape above it and thus there appears to be no logical progression between the individual chords of these bars. Therefore like Op. 28, No. 4, one is left to conclude that this passage is one that intrigues the ears with its eclectic mix of sonorities rather than provides a fertile ground for harmonic analysis.

There is an almost identical passage in Op. 28, No. 19 in Eb major. The underlying harmonic movement is from bIII to V as preparation for a perfect cadence into Eb at bar 33. This transition is achieved from bars 29-32 by means of consecutive diminished seventh chords.

![Figure 11. Op. 28, No. 19, consecutive diminished seventh harmonies, bars 28-32](image)

The diminished chords are written as they would be literally named (ignoring for a moment the inversions) compared to the examples of obviously functional harmonies. Again, the issue is whether one can assign Roman numerals to this passage. If interpreted as Chopin notated it, the answer appears to be negative. But
what if one heeds Abraham’s earlier advice that Chopin wrote in “in convenient rather than grammatically correct notation”? Starting from the penultimate harmony, D⁰⁷, this is evidently vii”⁰⁷ of Eb major; it may also be considered as V⁷m⁹ without the root. Therefore, it is, fundamentally, a dominant-equivalent chord. Going backwards, the D#⁰⁷ could be enharmonically spelt as an A⁰⁷, or vii”⁰⁷ of B♭, or V⁷m⁹ (without root) of Bb. The preceding C#⁰⁷ then becomes E⁰⁷, functioning as a dominant chord of F. A pattern appears to be emerging. If one continues in this manner, the progression through these four bars can be reinterpreted and read as: A⁷m⁹ – D⁷m⁹ – G⁷m⁹ – C⁷m⁹ – F⁷m⁹ – Bb⁷m⁹ – Bb. What I have outlined is the fundamental progression; the chords themselves are obviously presented as diminished sevenths and therefore do not contain the roots of the chords above. The essence of this passage, though, is simply the circle-of-fifths leading to the dominant of Eb major.

The harmonic skeleton of the phrase does not take into account the inversions. Each diminished seventh harmony lasts for two crotchets and the bass ascends a minor third between those two beats. This idea is treated sequentially in rising tones; the progression in the bass line from the G of bar 29 to the F (that leads to the dominant) of bar 32 takes the shape of a whole-tone scale. It is clear that there are two quite conflicting harmonic ideas in this passage. At its fundamental level, the harmony is a standard and traditional progression by fifths; yet the stability associated with this procedure is undermined, first by the use of diminished sevenths instead of dominant sevenths, and more importantly, by the presence of a whole-tone scale, the “tonally unstable” arrangement of notes that removes any notion of a tonal centre.48 The same technique is utilized from bars 42-45, in which a basic I-ii₆ progression is interrupted by a two-bar ascending whole-tone scale in the bass that again supports a circle-of-fifths harmonic progression. The effect of these passages is aurally remarkable; one can hear the musical logic, which obviously stems from the familiarity of the fundamental harmonic movement, but the predominance of the whole-tone bass line seeks and threatens to overpower this reaction. The listener is thus left in an ambiguous and uneasy position when the two starkly contrasting harmonic techniques are juxtaposed.

Finally, one cannot discuss the harmonic language of Chopin’s Op. 28 without referring to No. 2 in A minor. Huneker asks “is this not ugly, forlorn, despairing, almost grotesque, and discordant?”⁴⁹; Gide stated, “this is not a concert piece. I can see no audience liking it.”⁵⁰; Siepmann argues that “with all our experience of Debussy and Schoenberg, of Webern and Boulez, of Stravinsky and Stockhausen, the A minor Prélude retains its implacable and disturbing sense of modernity.”⁵¹ Indeed, for the author, Op. 28, No. 2 calls to mind Liszt’s *Nuages Gris*, S. 199 which is similarly bleak and aurally challenging. Given that Chopin’s 1838 piece preceded the Liszt miniature by 43 years, the prescience of the Polish composer is evident.

Op. 28, No. 2 presents harmonic challenges on both the surface and structural levels. Overall, bars 1-7 are within a G major framework, which subsequently acts as a pivot into D major in the following phrase. At bar 15, with the E in the bass, there is a sense of A minor, but analysts disagree on what harmony is conveyed. Michael Rogers argues that this constitutes the structural dominant of the piece⁵²; conversely, Leonard Meyer, who contends that A minor was reached in bar 11, views the harmony as I₄ with V not arriving until bar 22.⁵³ Ultimately, the answer seems arbitrary; a close examination of the surface harmonies show that while it is possible to ascribe a label, the aesthetic character of the piece, what the listener hears, cannot be determined or measured simply by Roman numerals.

In the first bar, for example, the notes E, B and G certainly indicate an E minor triad and given what follows, it appears to therefore function as vi in G major. What isn’t conveyed in this analysis is the prevalence of an augmented fourth that appears as a harmonic constant throughout this phrase; nor does it reflect the space or distance in the music — the opening E minor harmony spans an octave and a third.

Consequently, what is heard is not a semblance of an E minor triad but two empty or discordant intervals that are seemingly disjointed from one another. When the melody enters at bar 3, there is a stronger sense of specific harmonies; at bar 6, G major is enhanced by the presence of the B in the right hand, though the rocking of the inner voice between E and Eb certainly attempts to weaken this feeling.

The same problem occurs at bars 14-15, the point of conflict between Meyer and Roger’s analyses.

**Figure 12. Op. 28, No. 2, bars 1-8**

**Figure 13. Op. 28, No. 2, bars 14-15**
The final two quaver chords of bar 14 outline a French sixth that ‘resolves’ down to the E of bar 15. I say “resolves” with a level of reserve, given that the D# is left hanging over the barline. Similarly, although the B of bar 14 resolves as expected up to the C in bar 15, what one hears is the continuation of the inner voice that wavered discordantly between the D#, Cx, C§ and B of the previous bar. In bar 15, this semitone motion persists between C and B, casting doubt on Rogers’ theory (how to explain the C in terms of an E major harmony) and that of Meyer’s (the B in terms of A minor). Rogers argues that the E “dispels the harmonic and tonal fog that blanketed this prelude from the beginning”; on the contrary, I believe the “fog” only lifts at bar 22 with the surprising introduction of root-position diatonic chords. That Rogers and Meyer do not reach a consensus on the harmonic function of the chord at bar 15 would seem to support this view. Furthermore, it could be argued that the listener hears neither Rogers’ nor Meyer’s harmonic description of this passage (compared to the clarity of a French sixth to dominant progression that occurs in Op. 28, No. 20, bar 6, for example); rather the musical feature that predominates this phrase is the relentless and unsettling interval of a semitone in the inner voice.

In this brief coverage of Chopin’s harmonic spectrum, I have discussed the gradual development away from conventional harmonic practices towards more extensive chromatic modulation and the use of harmonic language that cannot necessarily be read in functional terms. In the case of the latter examples, it becomes futile and unfulfilling to approach the harmony from a solely functional perspective. One of the intriguing aspects of Chopin’s inventory is his use of chords as a colouring device; when this happens, there is no alternative but to turn to more ‘primitive’ analytical tools and interpret the music from a more critical and aesthetic perspective. This still requires detailed examination of the score but places greater emphasis on what is actually heard and how the informed listener may respond to the smaller formal elements (such as a single inner voice moving by semitones). In this regard, the previous paragraphs may read as rather critical of Rogers and Meyer’s work. The

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55 Ian Bent defines analysis as concerning the “constituent elements” of a work and “explain[ing] how they operate.” In this regard, something as simple as identifying the notes of a melody constitutes analysis just at an elementary level. The qualification ‘primitive’ therefore refers to my practice, in this context, of considering single notes or chords by name not function, as opposed to more technical and specialized forms of analysis. See Ian Bent with William Drabkin, Analysis (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), 2.
flaws in Rogers’ argument have already been noted; however, it should be acknowledged that Meyer states “the explanation [of the harmony] lies in the importance of doubt and uncertainty in the shaping of aesthetic affective experience.” He seems wary, therefore, of the limitations of analysis in this context.

Later composers of the nineteenth century who stretched the tonal idiom to its limits were without doubt indebted, in part, to Chopin. Indeed, the problems of analysing the Prelude from Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde are remarkably similar to those in the case of Op. 28, No. 2 — namely, harmonic descriptions do not capture the complete nature of the music. The intriguing aspect of Chopin’s harmony, though, is that it is grounded within a diatonic framework. The basic devices used by Chopin are far from extraordinary — circle-of-fifths, vi-V-I progressions, large-scale tonic to dominant movement. What is extraordinary is the means by which he transforms these simple harmonies into seemingly functionless sonorities. It is tempting for the writer here to proffer a comment along the lines of “a lesser composer would (or would not) have…” Although such a phrase smacks of amateur criticism, one would find it difficult to deny its truth. The aspect that, in part, makes Chopin’s music so appealing is his transcendence of the ordinary, the ineffable quality one might term style.

Rhythmic Impulses

Without wishing to state the obvious, it is clear that the use of subversive rhythmic elements and gestures is central to Op. 28 as a means of developing musical tension. In some Préludes, Chopin uses relatively stock techniques such as hemiola or a ‘two-against-three’ pattern briefly for contrast; in others, the inherent pulse of the music, as suggested by the time signature, is challenged by the phrase structure and shifting accents. As in the preceding section on harmonic language, a selection of Préludes that exemplify these features will be considered.

There is a temptation to relate Chopin’s treatment of rhythm to his ‘Polish-ness.’ Indeed, a significant genre in Chopin’s output is the Polish folk dance, the mazurka, of which the primary rhythmic characteristic is the accent on the weak beats of the bar within a triple metre (especially the second beat). It is thought that this feature may have originated from the paroxytonic accent of the Polish language, in which the stress falls on the penultimate syllable of a word.\(^\text{57}\) Furthermore, Roger Scruton points out that Slavonic languages make infrequent use of articles and consequently, the up-beat is virtually redundant in Eastern European folksong.\(^\text{58}\) This can be contrasted to the syntax of Romantic and Germanic languages, in which it is common for an article to precede the noun; it is not surprising that the Western music tradition makes frequent use of the anacrusis, analogous to the linguistic article, which leads into the main musical statement. The question is raised then, do the examples of rhythmic tension in Op. 28 (and Chopin’s music, more generally) reflect a clash of two linguistic and musical traditions? Can the analyst state, with confidence, that this feature is attributable to Chopin’s Polish heritage (even though the composer spent much of his life away from Poland)? In the case of the mazurkas, it may be possible to draw such conclusions. Otherwise, it is perhaps best to avoid a reductive approach.

Jolanta Pekacz, whose primary concern is the biographical study of Chopin, notes that the relationship between his Polish lineage, on the one hand, and his life and music, on the other, has generally been assumed, but not proven, by writers.\(^\text{59}\) She reaches the


conclusion that Chopin’s success in Paris came about because of his avoidance of patriotic tendencies; while he was sympathetic to the Polish cause, he had a distaste for strong political convictions and possessed an ability “to place himself above the narrow limits of nationality.”  Therefore, while Chopin’s development of the mazurka and polonaise genres are obvious manifestations of his ‘Polish-ness,’ one should be again be careful of hastily connecting his music with his biography.

Op. 28, No. 7 in A major unambiguously demonstrates the infusion of the characteristics of a mazurka into a Prélude.

Figure 14. Op. 28, No. 7, bars 1-4

The Prélude essentially consists of a repeated four-bar phrase alternating between dominant and tonic, the first of which is shown above. Within the four bars, each two-bar unit contains an ascending melodic line that leads into three repeated chords. The melody is directed towards the chords, however, this creates a sense of rhythmic tension as the melodic stress therefore falls on the second beat of each bar, clearly deriving from the mazurka pattern. By comparison, the harmonic stress, the single bass note, is felt on the down-beat, as would be expected in Western European music. In all its simplicity, Op. 28, No. 7 presents the listener (especially one familiar with Western music principles) with a juxtaposition between an Eastern European and a Western European rhythmic technique. The piece is short on harmonic, and even melodic variation and thus it is the variance between stress and metre that engages the listener.

Op. 28, No. 10 in C# minor displays a similar tension between stress and metre that intimates a mazurka influence on this Prélude. Like No. 7, it is the clash between the right and left hand parts that establishes the rhythmic interest, though Chopin’s

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60 Ibid., 172.
treatment of the harmony at the cadence points also contributes to the effect. This point is exemplified in the first four-bar phrase, in Figure 15 below.

Figure 15. Op. 28, No. 10, bars 1-4

The opening bar follows conventional rhythmic practice — the ornamental figure provides an anacrusis to the melody which coincides with the tonic harmony. The subdominant harmony on the third beat then sounds as an up-beat leading into the next bar, where again the tonic chord falls on the down-beat. In the second bar, the melody continues its descent accompanied by the i-iv-i progression that had been established in the preceding bar. The final tonic chord, the temporary ‘goal’ of the phrase falls on the third beat of the bar though. Likewise, when the dominant harmony is introduced in the third bar, it is not fully established until the second beat even though the melody reaches its resting point on the G# on the first beat of the bar. In the fourth bar, the dominant harmony is heard on the first beat, but the dotted quaver rhythm provides the impetus to reach the closing point of the phrase (also over a dominant harmony). This moment of structural importance lands on the second beat of the bar, obviously in opposition to the listener’s expectations.

These expectations are further undermined on the final beat of the fourth bar; one anticipates an anacrusis that is supported by a dominant harmony. Instead, the upper voices shift from a dominant seventh chord to a harmonically ambiguous diad of G# and E. Certainly the continuation of the G# suggests the dominant, however, the
presence of the E hints at a i₃ chord. A second inversion tonic chord is by no means a resolution but the implication of the tonic relaxes the harmonic tension. What is lost in harmonic tension, though, is made up for in rhythmic tension, given that this occurs both on the final beat of the bar (rhythmically, a weak point) and in the place of the up-beat that is expected in this context.

The divergence between the stressed notes within a phrase and the underlying metre is further emphasised in the third phrase of Op. 28, No. 10.

Figure 16. Op. 28, No. 10, bars 9-10

The passage maintains the alternating i-iv harmonic progression (though now in F# minor) and the rapid, descending melody. In the preceding phrases, the accompanying figure contained a crotchet rest, so as to ensure the coincidence of the tonic harmony and the first beat of the following bar. In this phrase, there is no rest and the accompaniment drives towards the tonic chord which now falls on the second beat of the bar. Consequently, one hears a subversion of the triple metre (possibly a bar of 4/4?) and interprets the F# minor chord in terms of finality within the phrase — it becomes a stationary point of harmonic rest. By contrast, the right hand melody continues its descent towards the F# on the first beat in bar 11, seemingly oblivious that the accompaniment has ceased. Op. 28, No. 10 does not as explicitly reveal mazurka characteristics as done in No. 7, even though there are passages in which the music tends towards the second beat of the bar. Rather than interpreting this as mazurka-like, listeners can hear various ‘voices’ that follow their own metrical patterns — the melody within a triple metre, the left hand chords shifting between triple and duple/quadruple metres, and so forth. The rhythmic tension thus occurs with the confluence of these voices. Like Op. 28, No. 7, the C# minor Prélude is of limited
harmonic and melodic design; it falls to the rhythmic variations and tension to maintain interest through the piece.

The Préludes in B major and Eb major, Op. 28, Nos. 11 and 19, respectively, perhaps best highlight Chopin’s use of a ‘three-against-two’ rhythmic pattern as a means of increasing tension within a phrase. Consider the opening phrase of No. 11.

Figure 17. Op. 28, No. 11, bars 1-6

Following a two-bar introduction, the first phrase opens with a two-part melody. The upper line arguably assumes the more prominent role with the C# seemingly maintaining its voice throughout the bar and gently rocking towards the D on the final quaver of the bar, a melodic shape that fits the lilting nature of the 6/8 time signature. The fluidity of the melody is unexpectedly interrupted in bar 5 when the upper voice moves from C# to B to D in line with a simple triple metre as opposed to the prevailing compound duple. This brief deviation ultimately provides the impetus to the phrase; by emphasising the rhythmic opposition between the dominant metre and its variation, there is an expectation of return to the initial metre, as duly occurs in bar 6. Therefore, the shift between metres functions as a device for small-scale tension and resolution within each phrase.

Furthermore, one could argue that the presentation of this rhythmic variation is itself a device for tension and resolution on a larger scale. The brief digression to a simple triple metre is present throughout the Prélude, with the exception of the third four-bar phrase, in the relative minor, and concluding phrase, a detail for which there are
several possible explanations. Its omission from the third phrase could be in part as a comparison between the ‘A’ and ‘B’ sections and in part because the musical tension is created by the contrast between the major and minor tonalities. As for the final bars, by this point the harmonic tension has been completely resolved and the avoidance of rhythmic variation is therefore complementary and supports the idea of closure at the end of the piece.

The passage below has already been discussed at length, with regards to its harmonic features.

Figure 18. Op. 28, No. 19, bars 29-32

Op. 28, No. 19 is written in 3/4 time, but with the constant triplet quavers, one naturally assumes it to be in 9/8, or compound triple, time. As already noted, this passage highlights the interval of a minor third between the stressed quavers of each beat in all the voices. This idea is then treated sequentially, ascending by whole tones every two crotchet beats. The passage therefore takes on the appearance of a duple metre. The technique is fundamentally the same used in Op. 28, No. 11 (though switching from triple to duple metre). It serves an identical purpose — that is, to develop the surface tension — though, its effect is arguably more radical here, given the rhythmic variation occurs concurrently with a period of heightened harmonic tension and an ascending melody. These two examples present relatively un-adventurous musical features; essentially, they illustrate the simple rhythmic devices and variations through which tension can be developed, sustained and then released.
When these variations are combined with mazurka patterns (or at least, patterns that appear to derive from the mazurka), the result can be somewhat unsettling for the listener, especially as it falls outside the expectations and conventions of Western European music. The appeal of Op. 28 resides in Chopin’s subtle treatment of these rhythmic elements; the listener rarely gains a sense of certainty and consequently remains fully engaged in the music.

The final rhythmic element discussed here is the use of ornamental figuration. Robin Maconie poetically describes this feature in Chopin’s music as the “grace-note fioriture…which take time off from pursuing a musical argument to cascade effortlessly through the air.”61 This feature can also be found in his Nocturnes, such as Op. 62, No. 2 in E.

![Figure 19. Op. 62, No. 2, Nocturne in E major, bars 25-31](image)

One can hardly expect a pianist to calculate precisely the division of a crotchet into eleven equal parts as would be the case in bar 31 above and thus it is expected that the music is played with varying degrees of rhythmic freedom according to performance preferences. Consequently, the melody seems to transcend the musical flow of time, which is temporarily suspended.

This particular feature is relatively scarce in Op. 28; No. 18 in F minor and No. 24 in D minor contain passages of this nature but in contrasting styles. Op. 28, No. 18 is dominated by disjointed phrases and the irregular tuplet groupings enhance this effect.

Figure 20. Op. 28, No. 18, bars 12-13

The cut-common time signature indicates a simple duple metre, but it is impossible to conceive how this information could be conveyed given both the constantly changing rhythmic groupings and the tempo marking *allegro molto* that renders the division of beats harder to decipher. The entire Prélude appears to be liberated from any metrical constraints and therefore the tuplet of bar 12 is a continuation of the “musical argument,” to use Maconie’s term, in the same rhythmic vein.

One can compare this feature of No. 18 to Op. 28, No. 24, in which rhythmically-free melodies are juxtaposed against a relentless accompaniment as shown in Figure 21.
Figure 21. Op. 28, No. 24, bars 13-19

Chopin creates a stark contrast in Op. 28, No. 24 as the soaring, right hand scale passages seek to escape the strict pulse of the omnipresent left hand figuration. The D minor Prélude is one of the more virtuosic of Op. 28 and these passages undoubtedly require superb pianistic technique to convey the two rhythmically conflicting elements. The fundamental changes in registers of the melody (for example, the start of bar 14 to the start of bar 15) coincide with the accompaniment but the connecting passages appear to float away from the beat and play out in their own time.

This section has intended to provide an introduction to some of the rhythmic devices and techniques used by Chopin in Op. 28 and the effect this has on the musical experience. There are other Préludes that would exemplify the points discussed here, namely, in relation to the tension created through rhythmic ‘dissonances,’ that is,
stresses that fall outside the natural metre. As part of a discussion on harmony and pianistic techniques, Leonard Ratner’s *Harmony: Structure and Style* contains an excellent section that divides several of the Préludes into their various voices which allows the reader to see the positioning of the different parts within each bar. Particularly revealing is the page devoted to Op. 28, No. 5 in D, a Prélude that is constantly moving but in an awkward and disjointed manner; Ratner shows that there are six individual voices, each contained within a 2/8 framework but staggered throughout the 3/8 bar, hence creating the apparent rhythmic disorder.\(^6\) The point is abundantly clear: Chopin uses simple rhythmic variation but creates extraordinary amounts of surface tension through detailed manipulation of these techniques. What seems to set Chopin’s music apart from his less celebrated contemporaries is the craftsmanship involved — in all the examples discussed, the rhythmic tension works in close conjunction with either the harmony or the melody or the structure, and so forth. It is clear that in Chopin’s Préludes, the rhythmic devices are not mere gestures; rather, they are integral to each composition.

Closure and Finality in Op. 28

The final point to be considered is the concept of closure in the Op. 28 Préludes. It is appropriate to finish on this note given that it relates to the initial issue discussed in this essay, the prélude as a genre. As mentioned earlier, this piece in Chopin’s time functioned generically as an introduction to a larger-scale work and therefore would be ‘open-ended’; by comparison, one would anticipate that in an autonomous stand-alone work, the music would reach a natural point of conclusion. V. Kofi Agawu notes that in the nineteenth century, “the strategy by which the composer takes leave of his audience [was] of fundamental importance to the work’s effect.”

I have already argued that Chopin’s Op. 28 presented his audience with a degree of ambiguity regarding the Préludes’ function; this derives, in part, from the endings of the individual works which hover between the opposing points on the closure spectrum.

The discussion here takes as its starting point the ideas of Kallberg, who examines the endings of the Préludes in relation to the body of the work. He, in turn, acknowledges the work of Agawu, who constructs a theoretical model for closure and uses formal analytical techniques to reach conclusions about Op. 28. At the heart of both discussions is the notion that a number of the Préludes’ endings bear little similarity to the stylistic features that predominate the piece. Several examples that exemplify this point are considered below.

Op. 28, No. 2 and No. 4 both present instances of a final cadence that appears completely detached from the body of the Prélude. It has been noted that No. 2 is marked by dissonant and functionally ambiguous harmonies and a weak sense of tonic key. In the final four bars, though, A minor is unequivocally confirmed as the tonic key, when the chromatic accompaniment is abandoned in favour of block chords that outline a straightforward perfect cadence.

The ending of No. 4 in E minor is similar in that the predominant figuration of the Prélude is substituted for a detached perfect cadence, as shown in Figure 23.

The perfect cadence of bars 24-25 has perhaps a more logical place here than in No. 2 because of the overarching structure of the Prélude (two phrases of an extended progression from tonic to dominant). However, the manner in which the cadence is presented — straightforward and clear — can be contrasted with the continuous voice-leading by semitones that had earlier formed the changing and non-functional harmonies, as seen in bar 22. Agawu argues that even though the final cadence is detached from the “rhetorical dimension” of the Prélude, its presence is required from a syntactical perspective. The C⁷ chord of bar 23 (which ultimately functions as a German sixth) is the product of the semitone progression in the bass (B natural to B flat) and creates a “hopeless measure” in which no closure can be naturally effected. Therefore although the final cadence suggests a “gestural discontinuity on the surface,” it is necessary so that the music can reside structurally in the tonic key upon completion of the Prélude.

There are further examples in which a chordal final cadence appears to be separated from the preceding figuration — such as in No. 8, No. 11, No. 16, No. 18, No. 19,

67 Ibid., 14.
68 Ibid., 14.
and No. 21, all to varying extents. This feature confirms the ambiguous generic nature of the Op. 28 Préludes. As Kallberg notes, when the closure provided by the ending is incomplete then it serves more appropriately as an introduction to the following work (in which overall closure may be achieved).\(^{69}\) In this sense, the detached nature of the cadence renders the Prélude as more \textit{stylistically} incomplete. But on the other hand, the use of a perfect cadence provides \textit{syntactical} closure. Therefore, the listener is left to reflect on two conflicting views — for anyone with basic musical awareness, one can hear that the Préludes end as is theoretically expected; but one also hears a certain open-endedness from a musical or aesthetic perspective, as if Chopin added several extra bars to the music as an after-thought.

Furthermore, the Préludes No. 15, No. 17 and No. 23 all end according to the “rhetoric” of the piece (that is, stylistically complete), yet there remains an uneasy sense of closure.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure24}
\caption{Op. 28, No. 15, bars 87-89}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure25}
\caption{Op. 28, No. 17, bars 88-90}
\end{figure}

In the first two examples, the Préludes conclude in the tonic key and maintain the repetitive inner voice that characterizes the piece. In this sense, the music comes to an appropriate close, syntactically and stylistically. However in both cases, the syntactical closure is undermined somewhat by this repeated figure because of the emphasis it places on notes that are not the tonic — the dominant in No. 15, while in No. 17, the third and the fifth both take prominent roles in the voicing with the Ab relegated to an inner part. Furthermore, No. 17 appears to conclude with a I\(_c\) chord; the tonic note is only present from the previous bar courtesy of the pedal.

Op. 28, No. 23 presents further complications to the analyst and listener. Again, the predominant figuration closes the piece firmly in the tonic key. Yet in the penultimate bar, the left hand adds an Eb to its arpeggiated accompaniment, suggesting a dominant seventh chord on F. Part of the problem is the Eb’s innocuous nature. It simply floats into the music and although sustained by the pedal, one hardly senses a strong pull towards a Bb harmony as the note implies. Agawu notes that the use of the dominant seventh refers back within the Prélude to other points of structural importance, in which the seventh was used to direct the music towards the particular ‘tonic’ key of that time. He concludes, therefore, that the disturbance of global closure is compensated for by the emphasis on the primary feature of local closure in the Prélude.\(^70\) In other words, the final phrase of Op. 28, No. 23 structurally echoes the previous phrases in the piece through the continued use of the dominant seventh; therefore, Chopin is able to subvert the expectations of final closure because the ending is understood as a subtle repetition of this feature, rather than as an applied dominant. Once again, there appears to be a deliberate blurring between closed and open-endedness.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the ending of Op. 28, No. 24 in D minor. The virtuosic nature of the Prélude has already been noted and the final bars are no different.

The ending is remarkable; the apparent D minor harmony is infused with a G♯, an augmented fourth above the tonic, and a B§ that then resolves down to the B♭, creating a German sixth chord on B♭ in first inversion. A Schenkerian analysis would show that D minor had been reached many bars earlier (perhaps bars 64-65) and this passage is merely a coda that, structurally, prolongs the tonic harmony. The sheer sonorities of the final phrase, though, are extraordinary with the semitone progression from B§ down to A of bar 73 evoking a sense of tragedy and despair that is further emphasised by the D notes in the lowest register of the keyboard to finally end the work. Huneker writes that the Prélude is “almost infernal in its pride and scorn” but without any “vestige of uncontrolled hysteria.” Indeed, the final passage of No. 24 could make a claim to being the most aurally spectacular from Op. 28. I have discussed the improbability of Op. 28 being conceived of as an integrated set; is it coincidence then that Chopin saves such a display of virtuosity for this moment? If Op. 28 were a set then the final bars would certainly seem appropriate. Therefore, the insecurity and uncertainty over the generic functions of the Op. 28 Préludes is maintained until its conclusion. Although there is significant evidence to regard the Préludes as individual works, it is brief moments, such as the ending of No. 24, that fuel a lingering doubt in the scholar’s mind that maybe, all these years later, we have

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got it wrong. Part of the appeal of Op. 28 is that the issue will never be conclusively solved, leaving one to only speculate. Surely this was intended by Chopin.
Conclusion

It seems unfortunate so much of Op. 28 has been passed over in this essay, including the furious and rollicking No. 12, No. 16 or No. 22, the “menacing” No. 14\textsuperscript{72}, the nocturne-like No. 13, and No. 6 in which the left and right hands reverse their conventional roles. This discussion took as its starting point the idea of genre — essentially, what musical expectations were raised in Chopin’s times by the title Prélude. The function of the prélude appears to have been deliberately confused by the composer in Op. 28 and the concluding examination of the endings of the pieces explicitly supports this argument. Ideas of ambiguity were also evident when considering the harmonic and rhythmic elements of Op. 28. Considerable emphasis was placed on the harmonic language of the Préludes; this is justified, though, given that “Chopin’s ideas [were] frequently harmonic rather than melodic.”\textsuperscript{73} The examination of rhythmic elements in Op. 28 primarily highlighted the simple means by which Chopin developed musical tension; one can also discern shades of ‘Polish-ness’ that are evident through the use of mazurka-derived patterns.

The underlying approach has predominantly been critical; invoking Ian Bent’s definition, I have described and evaluated what is experienced by one who listens to Op. 28.\textsuperscript{74} Effective criticism, though, has a symbiotic relationship with analysis and therefore close examination of the formal elements of Op. 28 has provided the starting points for further discussion. This approach has created a foundation for making informed and substantiated judgments. In doing so, some of the “universe” contained in the Préludes of Op. 28 has been discovered. It is somewhat exceptional that within pieces of such brevity, one can find so much musical information, so much ambiguity, and ultimately so much pleasure.

Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger sums up Op. 28 with the words,

\textsuperscript{72} Gregor Williams, “The Phenomenal Martha Argerich,” trans. Stewart Spencer, in Martha Argerich, \textit{Frédéric Chopin: Préludes, Piano Sonata no. 2} (Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, 1977), CD.
\textsuperscript{73} Abraham, \textit{Chopin’s Musical Style}, 77.
\textsuperscript{74} Bent, \textit{Analysis}, 4.
Un siècle et demi après leur première publication, les 24 Préludes continuent à briller d’un éclat singulier et à exercer une fascination unique dans la littérature de piano.\textsuperscript{75}

These words were written over 20 years ago but still resonate today suggesting that little has changed. As my discussion has demonstrated, Op. 28 continues to ask questions of the performer, the listener and the scholar, some of which remain difficult to answer satisfactorily. It is for this reason that Eigeldinger’s statement rings true and furthermore, it is for this reason why one can speak of a timeless quality in Chopin’s Op. 28 Préludes.

\textsuperscript{75} Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, “Les Vingt-quatre Préludes op. 28 de Chopin Genre, Structure, Signification,” Revue de Musicologie 75, no. 2 (1989), 201. Translated by the author as: “A century and a half after their first publication, the 24 Préludes continue to shine with a distinctive brightness and prompt a fascination unique within the piano repertory.”
Bibliography


