

Ensemble for the Romantic Century

presents

Chopin: Letters from Majorca

Thursday, February 26, 2009, 8:00 PM

Pre-concert lecture, 7:00 PM

The Liederkrantz Foundation

6 East 87th Street

Written by James Melo

Simon Fortin as Chopin

Lynne McCollough as George Sand

Max Barros, piano

Directed by Donald T. Sanders

Production and Costume Design by Vanessa James

Eve Wolf and **Max Barros**, Artistic Directors
James Melo, Musicologist in Residence
Donald T. Sanders, Director of Theatrical Production

Special thanks to

Klavierhaus for lending the Pleyel piano for this performance
Mt. Holyoke College Department of Theatre Arts for the use of properties and costumes

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Cover design by James Melo

"We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes, and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and in others."

(Albert Camus)

FRYDERYK CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Preludes op. 28

- No. 1 in C major—Agitato*
- No. 2 in A minor—Lento*
- No. 3 in G major—Vivace*
- No. 4 in E minor—Largo*
- No. 5 in D major—Allegro molto*
- No. 6 in B minor—Lento assai*
- No. 7 in A major—Andantino*
- No. 8 in F-sharp minor—Molto agitato*
- No. 9 in E major—Largo*
- No. 10 in C-sharp minor—Allegro molto*
- No. 11 in B major—Vivace*
- No. 12 in G-sharp minor—Presto*
- No. 13 in F-sharp major—Lento*
- No. 14 in E-flat minor—Allegro*
- No. 15 in D-flat major—Sostenuto*
- No. 16 in B-flat minor—Presto con fuoco*
- No. 17 in A-flat major—Allegretto*
- No. 18 in F minor—Allegro molto*
- No. 19 in E-flat major—Vivace*
- No. 20 in C minor—Largo*
- No. 21 in B-flat major—Cantabile*
- No. 22 in G minor—Molto agitato*
- No. 23 in F major—Moderato*
- No. 24 in D minor—Allegro appassionato*

Prelude in C-sharp minor, op. 45—Sostenuto

PROGRAM NOTES

THE PLEYEL PIANO

The Pleyel firm of piano makers was founded in Paris in 1807 by Ignace Pleyel (1757-1831), a student and friend of Haydn and one of the most prolific composers of the late 18th century. Pleyel's decision to embark in this new venture was motivated by a desire to adapt the piano to the new demands of contemporaneous composers and performers. He recognized that the profound changes affecting keyboard music required a new conception of piano building, and from 1807 onward he devoted himself exclusively to this activity. Soon, he was building pianos for the greatest performers of the time, as well as for the European nobility and the high bourgeoisie. After his death in 1831, his son Camille Pleyel, himself an accomplished pianist, became head of the firm. It was under Camille's direction that the Pleyel firm acquired its international reputation, which remained unabated throughout the 19th century. Pleyel pianos were renowned for the velvety quality of their sound, the highly distinct sound color of each of the registers, and their richly nuanced voicing. They became extremely popular in the European salons, some of which were established by Camille himself with the purpose of showcasing his instruments. While makers such as Érard began to cater to audiences in the larger concert halls by making pianos capable of producing increasingly more powerful sonorities, Pleyel remained faithful to a sound ideal that was perfectly suited to the salon. Even in the late 19th century, when the Pleyel firm joined other European makers in incorporating technical and mechanical features that brought their pianos definitively within the scope of the modern concert hall, the firm insisted on retaining a sound quality that set their instruments apart from all others. The warm sonority of the Pleyel pianos captivated several composers and pianists, and Chopin was particularly fond of them. He considered the Pleyel instruments to be the ultimate in sound quality, and remarked that, when playing on these pianos, he could more faithfully translate his feelings and innermost thoughts. Ravel, Debussy, Saint-Saëns, and Manuel de Falla were among other composers who favored Pleyel pianos over those of other makers.

The instrument used in tonight's performance is a rare French red-painted and gold leaf decorated grand piano in the Louis XV "Chinoiserie" style, dating from 1890. Its magnificent embellishments indicate that it was intended as a luxury object in addition to its function as a musical instrument. Very likely, it was commissioned by a wealthy music lover to be organically integrated within a broader interior design conception. Structurally, it occupies an intermediate position between the earlier Pleyel pianos and the modern concert grand.

EL CANT DE LA SIBILLA

The religious song *El cant de la Sibilla* (The Song of the Sibyl), which is used in the script to trigger George Sand's memories of the Majorcan sojourn, is traditionally sung on Christmas Eve in Majorcan churches. The chant foretells the end of the world and is performed with great ceremony, with the singer dressed in a white tunic, a robe of

embroidered silk, a hat, and bearing a large sword. The singer walks up to the altar escorted by two or more altar boys carrying wax candles. Once there, the singer greets the crucifix, turns around, and begins the song, holding the sword erect throughout the performance. Once the song is over, the singer draws a cross in the air with the sword, turns around to the crucifix once again, usually bows, and afterwards is escorted away from the altar by the same boys. Instrumental interludes sometimes punctuate the a *cappella* delivery of the chant.

The author of The Song of the Sibyl is unknown. The prophecy was recorded for the first time as an acrostic poem in Greek by the bishop Eusebius of Caesarea and later translated into Latin by Saint Augustine in *The City of God*. It appeared again in the 10th century in different locations across Catalonia, Italy, Castile, and France. The chant was originally sung in Latin, under the name of *Judicii Signum*, but from the 13th century on, versions in Catalan are found. The Song of the Sibyl was almost totally abandoned after the Council of Trent forbade its performance. It was restored in Majorca as early as 1575, and continues to be sung throughout the island to this day.

The genius of Chopin is the deepest and the most filled with sentiments and emotions that ever existed. By means of one single instrument he knew how to speak the language of infinity. He could often express, in the briefest of forms, poems of extreme inspiration, or dramatic scenes of unheard-of force. He never felt the need for great material means to give an expression to his genius. He did not need saxophones and ophicleides to fill one's soul with terror; nor church organs or human voice to fill it with faith and with hope.

(George Sand)

Chopin had never been free from a feeling which might almost be said to form the soil of his heart, and for which he could find no appropriate expression except in his own language, no other possessing a term equivalent to the Polish word "zal". As if his ear thirsted for the sound of this word, which expresses the whole range of emotions, produced by an intense regret, through all the shades of feeling...Zal! It colors the whole of Chopin's compositions: sometimes wrought through their elaborate tissue, like threads of dim silver, sometimes coloring them with more passionate hues.

(Franz Liszt)

Fryderyk Franciszek [Frédéric François] **Chopin** was born in Zelazowa-Wola, Poland, on 1 March 1810, and died in Paris on 17 October 1849. Chopin's family moved to Warsaw the same year he was born, and there he began to study piano with Adalbert Zywny in 1816. In the following year, he published his first work, a *Polonaise in G minor*, even though he did not begin formal composition training until 1822, under the tutelage of Józef Elsner. In his adolescence, he moved among the aristocratic circles of Poland and became renowned as a piano prodigy, performing at several important halls in Warsaw and elsewhere. He completed his musical studies at the Warsaw Conservatory in 1829, and in 1830 he left Poland to embark on a projected series of concerts intended to launch his international career as composer and pianist. While he was abroad, Poland fell under Russian control and remained in that condition for the remainder of Chopin's life. Prevented from returning home, Chopin drifted aimlessly through the social circles of Vienna, feeling extremely lonely, depressed, and without any professional prospects. After a series of unremarkable concerts in a few Austrian and German cities, Chopin arrived in Paris in 1831, and there he settled for the rest of his life. He had become a *de facto* expatriate and exile, a condition that would become one of the pillars of his adult life.

Another momentous event happened in 1835, during a trip to Heidelberg. Chopin, who had a history of poor health dating back to when he was 16 years old, was struck by a severe bronchitis. The attack was unprecedented in its severity, so much so that he thought he would die. The disease proved to be an early manifestation of the host of pulmonary problems that would eventually kill him. From then on, every year (especially in the winter) he was afflicted with various bouts of bronchitis as well as other pulmonary ailments that very soon developed into full-blown tuberculosis. It was at this time that he acquired the image of a frail, consumptive composer, which was for a long time enshrined in the popular imagination.

The third defining moment in Chopin's life occurred in 1836, when he met the writer Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dudevant (1804-1876), who took the pseudonym of George Sand, at the salon of the Countess Marie D'Agoult. By the spring of 1838, they had begun an intimate relationship that would last until 1847 and would become one of the most sensational subjects of gossip in Parisian society. Chopin was now perceived as the weaker half in a relationship steeped in controversy and seen by the salon habitués as a travesty of gender power relations.

Thus, within the span of a few years, the framework of Chopin's adult life was defined. These important events in his personal life eventually became touchstones for the reception, analysis, and interpretation of his music. Metaphors of exile, disease, and gender ambiguity began to creep into the discourse about Chopin's music almost as soon as these topoi were identified by the public and the critics, as will be seen below in a discussion of his music. By the late 19th century, Chopin's music was seen through a distorting mirror of effeminate epithets and language suggestive of hermaphroditism and sodomy. It was only in the course of the 20th century that a major re-evaluation of Chopin's music took place, dispelling old and inaccurate myths, and restoring the composer to his rightful place in the musical pantheon.

CHOPIN, GEORGE SAND, AND THE MAJORCAN SOJOURN

Paris, Chopin's adopted home, was the stage where the most important phase of his personal and professional life unfolded. It was there that he wrote his mature compositions, where he rose to prominence as one of the foremost pianists and teachers of his time, and where he lived with George Sand, the most significant person in his affective life.

George Sand was one of the most controversial artists of the 19th century. A writer of enormous breadth, she produced 70 novels, 24 plays, 40,000 letters (some of them as long as essays), and dozens of articles on subjects ranging from poetry to politics and religion. Her country house in Nohant was an important meeting place for artists and intellectuals, and her apartment in Paris became a hubbub of political and social activism. In her personal life, she experienced abject poverty, international adulation, the most passionate love affairs (for which she became notorious), and the reclusive life of a nun. Her inclinations toward motherly self-sacrifice were often in conflict with an equally strong drive toward uncompromising independence. In one of her letters, she offered a concise reflection on her character and personality, in words that summarize the independent spirit for which she was known: "I value my freedom above all. I ask the support of no one, neither to kill someone for me nor to gather a bouquet; I go to the theater on my own, as a man does, by choice; and when I want flowers, I go on foot, by myself, to the Alps" (*Lettres d'un voyageur*, 1834-37). Elsewhere, she elaborated on some of the aspects of her life that were often invoked as evidence of her idiosyncratic persona:

At some point in my life I decided that I would be known to myself, my friends, and posterity, as George Sand. I chose this name because it was the only way I had to publish my novels and be respected as a writer. Since I had to pretend to be a man in name, I did so also in dressing... I have never been able to preen my person: much as I like cleanliness, I find studied elegance unbearable. I have never been afraid to run and play in the sun when God=s sun attracts me so much; I will walk in sturdy wooden shoes without fear of deforming my ankles; I cannot bear to wear gloves and renounce the quickness and strength of my hands. On the whole, with decent hair, eyes, teeth, and no deformities, I was neither ugly nor beautiful in my youth--a great advantage, I think, since ugliness prejudices people one way... and beauty another. They expect too much of a radiant face, and distrust a repellent one. It is best to have a face that neither dazzles nor frightens, and with mine I get on well with friends of both sexes. (*Histoire de ma vie*, 1854)

George Sand met Chopin on only a few occasions in some of the Parisian salons, before they became intensely involved with each other. It was Chopin's music, more specifically Chopin's performance of his *Ballade no. 1* at the salon of the Marquis de

Custine that captivated George Sand once and for all, and drew her irresistibly to him. She described the experience in her autobiography:

As Chopin began to play, the passion that usually was bottled up in him flowed over in streams; the piano trembled and shivered; sighs of inexpressible melancholy were followed by passages of boundless tenderness and interspersed by sudden outbursts of passion. At that moment, it was as if I knew how his character was in all things. I could feel that he ate his heart out over its slightest fluctuations. In his music, he could condense in ten bars tone poems of incredible grandeur and dramas of unequaled intensity. His was the destiny of all beings whose sensibilities are developed to excess.

By the time they met, George Sand was the mother of two children, Maurice and Solange, from her failed marriage to the aristocrat Casimir Dudevant in 1822. She had also embarked on a number of what she called “passionate friendships,” the most recent of which was a tortured and emotionally devastating attachment to the poet Alfred de Musset. As for Chopin, he was an expatriate in Paris, tormented with longing for his native Poland, his parents (especially his mother), his siblings, and everything else related to his childhood and adolescence. He was also the most celebrated composer making the rounds of the Parisian salons. In a short time, hostility began to develop around their relationship, sparked mostly by Chopin’s friends, who saw in George Sand a predatory woman who could seriously damage Chopin’s life and career. Chopin’s reserved and delicate nature added fuel to these misgivings, and further confirmed his friends’ assumptions that he needed to be protected against the emotional violence of a woman like George Sand.

The trip the lovers took to Majorca in 1838-39 was a pivotal moment in their lives. They had gone to the island in part to improve the health of Chopin and of George Sand’s son Maurice, but also for a chance to be alone together and thus strengthen their incipient relationship, far from the gossip of Parisian society. The journey, however, turned into a disaster. Initially, they were dazzled by the beauty and exoticism of the landscape, buildings, the local people, and their way of life. But they were also out of their milieu, far from the sophistication and comforts that Paris could offer, and living under rather precarious conditions. Chopin worked for the most part with a rudimentary piano that they had found in Palma while he awaited the arrival of a Pleyel piano, which was to be shipped from Paris.

While in Majorca, George Sand witnessed the final stages in the composition of the *Preludes op. 28*. The individual pieces were sketched, worked on, composed, or revised over a span of four years, but the final revision and assemblage of the collection for publication were accomplished during the sojourn in Majorca. It is impossible to ascertain how many of the preludes were actually composed during that time. In January 1839, Chopin sent the complete manuscript of the *Preludes* to his friend and copyist Julian Fontana in Paris. By then, their stay in Majorca had become a psychological torment and a matter of life and death for Chopin, whose tuberculosis was

aggravated beyond endurance by an unexpectedly severe winter. The progression of Chopin's illness forced them to leave Majorca after only a few months in the island.

The relationship between Chopin and George Sand, which continued for seven more years, was puzzling in many ways. Except for a few flares of passion, they had almost no sexual relations. George Sand's avowed need to devote herself to someone ("to sacrifice herself" as she once said), and Chopin's need to be mothered created a situation in which these urges could be fulfilled at some level. George Sand was also an extremely musical person, and Chopin was undoubtedly happy to find in her a sensitive and perceptive listener. In time, their relationship deteriorated due in part to Chopin's involvement in the familial problems of George Sand, her children, and her in-laws, about which he was forced to take sides. Most importantly, as many of their respective friends had repeatedly observed, the inherent incompatibility of their characters could sustain their intimacy only so far. George Sand did demonstrate an enduring devotion towards Chopin, and she went to great lengths to care for Chopin during the progression of his illness. It is interesting that, although Chopin dedicated many of his works to friends and acquaintances, there is not a single one dedicated to George Sand, nor to the other acknowledged love of his life, Maria Wodzinska (1819-1896). In the months leading to Chopin's death, he was often visited by many of his friends, pupils, and admirers; George Sand was not among them. Nor was she present when he died at 2:00 AM, 17 October 1849, after four days of a convulsive and troubled sleep.

CHOPIN'S MUSIC AND THE PRELUDES OP. 28

I would call Chopin's "Preludes" remarkable. I confess I imagined them differently, designed in the grandest style, like his "Etudes." Almost the opposite: they are sketches, beginnings of etudes, or, so to speak, ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusion. Chopin is and remains the boldest and proudest poetic mind of our time. The collection also contains the morbid, the feverish, the repellent. May each search what suits him. (Robert Schumann, 1839)

Chopin's career unfolded within the confines of highly individual stylistic parameters, which he seems to have defined very early in his life. His style evolved independently from all the major developments in European music. Unique among his contemporaries, Chopin never composed operas, symphonies, choral music, religious music, or any kind of programmatic music. His voice was that of the piano, and there has seldom been such a perfect match between ends and means in the history of Western music. In spite of the limitations of his medium, or perhaps because of them, Chopin was able to fashion a style of such integrity and individuality, that no one can ever mistake him for another composer. Robert Schumann, a great admirer of Chopin, pointed this out in one of his reviews of Chopin's works, published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1841:

Chopin could publish everything anonymous. One would recognize him immediately. Inherent in everything he does is that significant originality which, once displayed, leaves no doubt as to the master's identity. He produces,

moreover, an abundance of new forms that, in their tenderness and daring alike, deserve admiration. Always novel and inventive in externals, he remains the same in the construction of his compositions and in special instrumental effects. And although his influence is restricted to music for the piano, what he has produced is enough to enter his name ineradicably in the history of modern music.

Ironically, it was precisely the distinctness of Chopin's style that elicited some of the most vitriolic anecdotes about him as a person and as an artist. A combination of factors conspired to create an image of Chopin that was often distorted by exaggeration, and by a tendency to equate the nature of his style with his fragile physical condition, ravaged as he was by tuberculosis for much of his creative life. For instance, Chopin's refusal to pursue a public concert career has sometimes been attributed to his physical inability to produce a voluminous sound on the piano, which would be required in a large concert hall. Chopin's sonority was indeed small in comparison with that of the famous piano virtuosos of the 19th century, such as Liszt and Thalberg, but this was entirely a matter of personal choice. Chopin cultivated a subdued sound palette because it was adequate to what he wanted to express in his music. The metaphor of his illness, however, persisted in many unkind remarks by some of his contemporaries. Even Franz Liszt, who was one of Chopin's closest friends and one of the most perceptive analysts of his music, contributed to these misconceptions when he remarked that "the frailness of Chopin's heart and constitution forced upon him the feminine martyrdom of tortures never admitted, and weighted his destiny with certain features of feminine fate" (Franz Liszt, *Frédéric Chopin*, 1852). In a letter to George Sand, the Countess Marie D'Agoult (Liszt's mistress), wrote that "Chopin coughs with infinite grace. He is an irresolute man. The only thing about him that is permanent is his cough." Berlioz, a composer who favored bombastic sonorities and massive orchestral apparatus, reportedly remarked that "Chopin spent his entire life dying." And the chief music critic of the London *Times* in the 19th century, James William Davison (dubbed "the music monster"), dismissed Chopin as a "morbidly sensitive flea." Statements such as these must be known in order to be ignored, or at least to be evaluated for what they really are. Today, Chopin's artistry does not need any defense. He is one of those rare artists whose works are at once highly sophisticated and immediately accessible to anyone.

One of the most distinctive features of Chopin's style is the breadth and suppleness of his melodies, which are often enriched by pearly embellishments. More than anyone else, he endowed the piano with the ability to sing. In fact, his melodic style has often been linked to the flowing melodies of Vincenzo Bellini, one of the masters of Italian opera in the 19th century. Whether or not Chopin derived inspiration from Bellini, the vocal character of his melodic lines cannot be ignored. One should bear in mind, however, that these beautiful melodies are just one of the surface events in the highly complex textures of Chopin's works. The musicologist and pianist Charles Rosen called attention to the innovative aspect of Chopin's sonorities in his seminal study of Romantic music:

Even though Chopin wrote only for the piano and was not interested in orchestral color, his mastery of tone color is incontestable: his works reveal a range of sonorities unsurpassed before Debussy. The wonderful sonorities of Chopin's writing--the exquisite spacing, the vibrant inner voices--spring from an abstract structure of lines. The pianist is conscious, as he is in Bach, both of the way an individual line is sustained and of the passing of the melody from one voice to another. It is not only in small details that Chopin displayed this art, but in the general outline of the larger forms as well. The lyricism and the dramatic shock in his music are equally indebted to this craft (*The Romantic Generation*, 1995).

Another perceptive assessment of Chopin's sound technique comes from the critic Antoine Marmontel, who published the following statement in 1878:

If we draw a parallel between Chopin's sound effects and certain techniques of painting, we could say that this great virtuoso modulated sound much as skilled painters treat light and atmosphere. To envelop melodic phrases and ingenious arabesques in a half-tint which has something of both dream and reality: this is the pinnacle of art; and this was Chopin's art (*Les pianistes célèbres*).

In order to achieve the type of sonority outlined above, Chopin took advantage of the powerful resonance of the modern piano, and more specifically of the resources of the sustaining pedal. His melodies are supported by a rich harmonic fabric, with a wealth of secondary melodies embedded in the accompaniment, ready to emerge at any moment to the surface of the music. Chopin soon realized that the style he was pursuing would be better suited to the intimate atmosphere of the salon, where all the nuances could come across more clearly than in a large concert hall. In this sense, his arrival in Paris was providential. The city was extremely receptive to the sophistication of Chopin's musical language, which is confirmed by his success as one of the most sought after figures in the Parisian salons. He brought to these gatherings an unprecedented level of artistry, changing completely the conception of what constituted salon music.

The full compositional history of the *Preludes op. 28* is impossible to trace, since the documentary evidence is incomplete and totally lacking for some crucial moments in the creative process. Enough material survived for six of the preludes (nos. 2,4,7,10,17, and 21), making them the only ones that can be dated with certainty. For example, the charming prelude no. 7 was actually given as a souvenir to Chopin's friend Delfine Potocka in 1836; the prelude no. 17 was copied by Julian Fontana in 1837, at Chopin's request, to be given to Count Perthuis, an aide-de-camp to the Emperor Louis-Phillipe. The manuscripts for the preludes nos. 2 and 4 are dated from Majorca, but in general only a tentative chronology can be provided for the composition of the complete set. In addition to matters of chronology, editorial decisions when publishing the preludes are complicated by the fact that Chopin's works were often published simultaneously in France, England, and Germany. Variations and discrepancies among the sources are common. Furthermore, Julian Fontana's handwriting was strikingly similar to Chopin's, leading to misinterpretations by later commentators who believed that a particular

manuscript was an autograph by Chopin, when it was in fact a copy by Fontana. Several facsimiles of individual preludes, included in books as illustrations of Chopin's autograph, later were revealed to having been taken from the copy prepared by Fontana prior to the publication of the collection. In general, subsequent editions of the *Preludes* have been based on the conflation of five sources:

Chopin's autograph manuscript of the entire set, now housed at the National Library of Poland in Warsaw;

Julian Fontana's copy of the autograph, which is now in a private collection;

The first French edition based on Chopin's autograph, published by Ad. Catelin et Compagnie, Paris, 1839;

The first German edition based on Fontana's copy, published by Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1839;

The first English edition, probably based on the first French edition, published by Wessel & Co., London, 1840.

With the publication of the *Preludes*, Chopin challenged the long-held assumption that small forms were artistically inferior to large-scale works. It is unlikely that he considered the set as a unified work that would have to be performed complete in order to achieve its full musical meaning. Rather, he viewed each prelude as a self-contained work that could stand by itself in a concert program, and herein lies the true import of his innovative approach. The carefully planned sequence of keys (alternating major keys and their relative minors) was simply a compositional prop to guide the organization of the preludes within the collection, inspired by J.S. Bach's key schemes (albeit differently conceived) in the two volumes of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. During the 19th century, pianists still cultivated a tradition of playing preludes or other introductory pieces before launching into a full-fledged recital. Chopin himself consistently adopted this practice, and sometimes he even played the introduction to his *Ballade no. 2* as a self-contained prelude. It is important to keep in mind that the notion of a musical genre (sonata, concerto, symphony, prelude, etc.) is intrinsically bound to three factors: the dimensions of the work, its medium, and the context of its performance. In his conception of the prelude, Chopin subverted received notions about the dimensions and the performance context of such pieces. Particularly in the very brief and monothematic preludes, he forced the audience to adjust their expectations regarding the contents of a musical piece and the external elements (including its size) through which its meaning was conveyed. The concentration of the musical form went hand in hand with a microscopic focus on the expressive value of the smallest detail.

The *Preludes* cover an astonishing range of textures, melodic designs, harmonic progressions, and formal layouts. Some of them recall the character and structure of a nocturne (nos. 13 and 15), while others would be perfectly suitable for publication as an etude (nos. 8, 16, 19, and 24). There are those whose brevity and delicacy of sound suggest the feeble impression of a passing thought (nos. 5 and 7); still others are like the deep stirring of emotional distress (no. 14), or the infatuation with a playful idea (no. 23). Most importantly, each of the preludes initiates and completes a world of its own, revealing an extraordinary concentration of emotion and meaning. The power of their musical vocabulary is such, that the audience is held captive and in a state of heightened awareness by the nuances of every musical idea. Collectively, they create a kaleidoscope in which Chopin's entire artistic personality is reflected. Some of them have been subjected to a wide variety of interpretations. The prelude no. 2, for example, is one of the most analyzed of all Chopin's works. The approaches to this concentrated and emotionally complex piece have included deconstruction, post-structuralism, Schenkerian analysis, narratology, metaphorical studies, and an array of interpretative methods that seek to explain its melodic and harmonic idiosyncrasies. In his film *Autumn Sonata*, Ingmar Bergman chose this prelude (which is played first by the daughter of the celebrated concert pianist, and then by the pianist herself) to illustrate how elusive Chopin's *Preludes* remain for the performer, even after years of returning to them again and again. The scene is a magnificent demonstration of the emotional maturity that is required to unveil the meaning of the work, as it lies underneath its deceptively simple surface.

Chopin's *Preludes* have generated a long tradition of literary and extra-musical commentary, in the form of descriptive titles and poetry associated with each prelude. An illustration of such practice is given in the **Table** on the next page, which collects two famous series of epithets attached to the *Preludes*. George Sand's daughter, Solange, once suggested that her mother had given a title to each of the preludes, but no proof of such practice has been found. George Sand copied six preludes into her music album (nos. 2,4,6,7,9, and 20) but none of them is accompanied by any title or commentary. But it is possible that George Sand's ideas about the preludes were assimilated into Solange's own commentaries about Chopin and his piano playing.

Chopin himself was averse to any literary or extra-musical description of his works. George Sand's famous account of the dream that is traditionally associated with the prelude no. 15 (the "Raindrop" prelude) is a case in point. After narrating the dream in her memoir *Un hiver à Majorque*, she points out how Chopin was upset by her suggestion that the drops of rain were somehow "represented" in his prelude. He was obviously under the spell of a strong emotion, and for him that particular prelude could be the musical rendition of *that* psychological state, not a description of external elements. It must be pointed out that the very identity of the "Raindrop" prelude is debatable. The prelude no. 6 has been proposed as a candidate, and when Liszt repeated George Sand's story he identified the prelude in question as being the no. 8. All three (as with a few others) feature prominently repeated notes, which could evoke the regularity of the falling raindrops.

Poetic and metaphorical exegesis continued to be invoked in connection with Chopin's *Preludes*. When the composer Ferdinand Hiller organized a soirée in Düsseldorf on 3 November 1849 in honor of Chopin, who had recently died, the performance of each prelude was preceded by the recitation of poetry. Many other examples can be traced throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. André Gide (1869-1951), who was an accomplished amateur pianist and studied Chopin throughout his life, devoted much thought to the aesthetic, technical, and emotional character of the *Preludes*. He wrote in great detail about the interpretation of each of these pieces. Like many commentators, he was spellbound by the mystery of these works:

I admit that I do not understand the title that Chopin liked to give to these short pieces: "Preludes." Preludes to what? To me, each one of them is a prelude to a meditation. Each of them (and some are extremely short) creates a particular atmosphere, establishes an emotional setting, then fades out as a bird alights; some are charming, others terrifying; none are indifferent. Nowhere has Chopin revealed himself more intimately. (*Notes sur Chopin*, 1948)

The *Prelude op. 45* was composed in 1841, after the first summer that Chopin spent at George Sand's country house of Nohant. When Chopin settled into the routine of summer sojourns at Nohant, he ordered several treatises on counterpoint, and the *Prelude op. 45* is one of the first fruits of his new studies. The *Prelude* has the extended form of a nocturne, with its several sections consisting of contrapuntal variations of the opening idea. The harmonic language is remarkably chromatic, with a complex intertwining of several motivic elements. It was dedicated to Princess Elisabeth Czernicheff.

The reception of the *Preludes* during the 19th century was compromised by a rather unflattering school of criticism that developed in connection with Chopin's music and aesthetics, and which gave rise to gross misinterpretations and misjudgments. As we have seen, some critics perceived Chopin's music as effeminate, weak, and even diseased. In such circles, he was summarily dismissed as a composer whose only place was the *chambre de malade*, the sick person's room. The influential French critic Hippolyte Barbedette was among those who gave voice to these notions, in words that reflected the vocabulary of several similarly minded critics:

I will speak of Chopin's general influence on modern pianists... I do not hesitate to say it will be dangerous. Chopin was a sick man who enjoyed suffering, and did not want to be cured. He poured out his pain in adorable accents--this sweet melancholy language which he invented to express his sadness. One feels it to be irresistible and is suddenly overcome by its charm; since music is above all a vague and inexplicit language, he who plays Chopin's music, no matter how little he is under the spell of such melancholy thought, will inevitably end by imagining that it is his own thought he expresses. He will really believe in suffering, along with him who knew so well how to weep... Chopin's music is essentially unhealthy. That is its imperfection and also its danger. (*Chopin: Essai de critique musicale*, 1861)

These judgments undoubtedly arose out of an excessive focus on, and misinterpretation of, the purely sensual elements of Chopin's music. It is almost impossible not to be affected by Chopin's pearly and iridescent sonorities, and phrases that are, to borrow the words of Proust, "like long-necked, sinuous creatures, so free, so flexible, so tactile, which divert themselves in those fantastic bypaths only to return more deliberately to clutch at one's heart." Unfortunately, the elements that prompted such beautiful metaphors could also divert attention from Chopin's highly innovative formal and harmonic procedures, some of which anticipated the techniques of Richard Wagner. Throughout the 20th century, a combination of musicological research, interdisciplinary criticism, and a strong performance tradition have peeled away the layers of myth and cliché concerning Chopin, thus allowing his artistic self to emerge complete and unclouded by prejudice. His musical legacy rests securely in that kind of artistic pantheon where the only acceptable form of controversy is nothing but the vagaries of one's personal taste.

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