« Nothing could make me abandon my idea and my ambition, too bold perhaps, but noble nonetheless, of creating a new world for myself."

(Chopin to Józef Elsner, December 14, 1831).

The **Twelve Études, op. 10** were part of the first batch of works that Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) entrusted to the publisher Maurice Schlesinger in the autumn of 1832, a year after his arrival in Paris. Thus, from the outset, Chopin, at the time just 22 years old, was positioning himself as a master of his instrument, and an authority on piano technique. The composition of this important work had taken him from the autumn of 1829 to the closing months of 1832, and these Studies represented a radically new step in the evolution of pianistic style not only by virtue of their value as exercises, but also of the novelty and originality of their musical content. These Twelve Études bear the dedication *"To His Friend Franz Liszt",* at once an act of friendship and admiration, and at the same time a gesture towards the new school of Romantic pianists, at whose head Liszt stood. In 1837 Chopin brought out a second volume of **Twelve Études, op. 25**, which bring the series to conclusion, since the last two Studies of Op. 25 return to aspects of technique (arpeggios in C major, chromatic scales in A minor) which had been broached in the first two Studies of Op. 10: at opposite ends of the series, these four Études face each other as if in a mirror. The second set is also dedicated to Liszt, albeit indirectly this time, in the form of his companion, the Comtesse d'Agoult. These two impressive publications revolutionized the approach to piano technique: it fell to Chopin to bring poetry to scales and arpeggios, sixths and thirds… after him, acquiring technique would never again mean the sterile quest for mechanics devoid of style.

There are broadly speaking two sorts of Études: those of Chopin or of Debussy, for example (who was to dedicate his own set of Twelve Études of 1915 *"To the memory of Frédéric Chopin"*), which present a challenge not only for the performer, but also for the composer, who commits himself to a pre-determined discipline (sixths, repeated notes, black keys, and so on) in the manner of the poet who casts his inspiration in the mould of a Sonnet; or of the painter (Whistler, for example) who pre-selects certain colours, to the exclusion of all others, before taking up his brush… and the other sort of Étude, for which Rachmaninov would find a name (*Étude-Tableau*) but for which Liszt blazed the trail in such an inspired manner; here, the musical content can dispense, as the need arises, with specific aspects of technique…

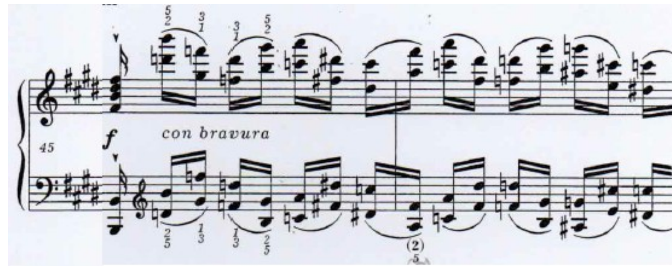
The following notes do not pretend to be a complete presentation of the masterpieces under discussion, which are already so well-known; I have preferred to concentrate on certain aspects of them, which have been perhaps less commented upon.

The stimulus for writing piano Studies, for Chopin, seems to have been the impact made on him of the playing of the celebrated violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840). One of the stops on his grand European tour of 1829 was Warsaw, where Paganini arrived in the month of May, remaining there until July, and giving a total of twelve concerts. We can suppose that Chopin attended most of them. On July 16, Elsner (1769-1854) hosted a reception for the great violinist at the School of Music of which he was the director, and presented his star-pupil, Chopin, to Paganini, who recorded the meeting in his diary. It very much looks as if the shock on his artistic system of Paganini's reputedly diabolical performance and extraordinary virtuosity jolted Chopin into writing the first "Exercises" of what were to become the Twelve Études op. 10, of which several were completed before he left his

native land for ever in 1830. If the influence of the phenomenon that was Paganini on Liszt is well-known and much discussed, his mark on Chopin has received less attention. It is worth recalling that Chopin's first and only piano teacher was the family friend Wojciech Żywny (1756-1842), who was primarily a violinist; also, that Chopin ceased having formal piano lessons at the age of 12. We have the following interesting remarks of Chopin's father in a letter to his son from November 27, 1831: *"The mechanics of piano playing took up little of your time, and your mind was always more occupied than your fingers. Where others could spend an entire day working at the keyboard, you seldom spent a full hour playing other peoples' music."* Even if Chopin showed himself fully cognizant of the music written for his instrument, including the impressive number of Studies that were already in circulation, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this young pianist, whose playing rivalled that of the greatest (especially in private, as he disliked appearing in public) was largely self-taught… and instead of limiting the search for formative influences on his technique to the works of the likes of Moscheles, Clementi, or Cramer (to name only those for whom Chopin's admiration is attested), it might be interesting to reflect on the influence of the great violinists with whom he came into contact: Paganini, Lipiński, the young Josef Slavik (1806-1833) – even, a little later on, H. W. Ernst: for in his quest for *"creating a new world"* for himself and his chosen instrument, it appears that Chopin, with the freedom of the self-taught, adapted certain techniques he had observed in these great virtuosos to his own playing style. That he had seen and studied them at close range is again confirmed by a letter he wrote from Vienna on December 26, 1830 to his friend Jan Matuszyński: *"I have just got back from Slavik's, the famous violinist with whom I've struck up a friendship (Paganini excepted, I've never heard anything like it: he can take 96 staccato notes to a single stroke of the bow. It's unbelievable."* It is certainly not by chance if, some ten years later when teaching his Austrian pupil Friederike Müller (who studied well-nigh all of the 24 Études with him), he told her that working correctly at the first Étude would give her arpeggios *"like bow-strokes"* (letter of Müller to her family in Vienna from May 10, 1840): Chopin's imagination enabled him to adapt the movement of the violinist's bowing technique to the pianist's right arm, which moves back and forth at a regular and moderate speed, while the fingers play a number of notes with the rapidity of the violinist's left-hand fingers… The same principle could apply to the second Étude as well, as regards the flexibility of the wrist and the elbow; even if, by Chopin's own admission, the idea of a chromatic scale played solely with the 3rd, 4th, and 5th fingers came to him in emulation of Moscheles's Study op. 70 no. 3, which requires the playing of the chromatic scale with the thumb, 2nd and 3rd fingers… It is intriguing to find the following spontaneous comparison to a *violinist*, in a letter Mendelssohn wrote in 1834 after hearing Chopin play: *"As a pianoforte player Chopin is now one of the very finest; quite a second Paganini, doing all sorts of wonderful things that one never thought could be done."* (Alan Walker p. 280).

Besides the first two Études, what other traces of violin-inspired technique can we find in these two sets of Studies? The following are a few examples out of many: the *con bravura* section of the third Étude, with the linked pairs of sixths, is very similar to virtuoso violin writing:

Example 1: Étude op. 10/3



In the Fourth Étude, the pivotal motion of the second finger of the right hand evokes the action of the bow encompassing all four strings, and requires a similar rotation of the arm:

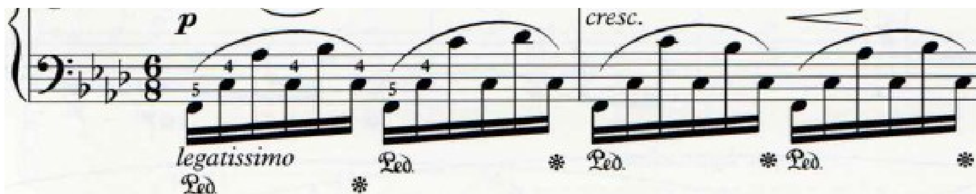
Example 2a: Etude 10/4

likewise in the left hand:

Example 2b: Etude op. 10/4

In the Ninth Étude, the left hand uses the fourth finger as pivot, and the rocking motion required to link the 4th and 5th fingers produces a movement of the wrist and elbow similar to the violinist's bowing arm:

Example 3: Etude op. 10/9



Étude 11 consists of arpeggios, but the arpeggios in themselves do not constitute the ultimate technical challenge in this Study: rather the need to bring out the melody that lies on top of them, sometimes by means of the transferring of pressure behind the 5th finger as it progresses from one key to the next, just as the violinist changes position by moving a finger along the string; this sliding of a single finger to link notes became a hallmark of Chopin's technique. It is interesting to learn that the virtuoso H. W. Ernst (friend of Berlioz and Liszt) played his own transcription of this Study, and Chopin did not seem unhappy with the result (see F. Müller's letter to her family from May 10 1840); the 10th Étude, and also Nos. 18, 20, 21 and 22, deal with parallel thirds, sixths, and octaves: in the

sixths and octaves, Chopin requires the pianist to bring out the top and bottom notes alternately, in the manner of a violinist who can, while playing two strings simultaneously, bring out one or the other by exerting pressure with the bow. The charming *Souvenir de Paganini* shows to what extent Chopin associated successive thirds and sixths with the playing of the Genovese virtuoso. Another example is perhaps the "double-stopping" in the 7th Étude, and the final upward flourish which is so reminiscent of the violinist's way of playing the arpeggio on the lower string, while stopping to add fifths and sixths on the upper string:

Example 4: Etude op. 10/7

There is a certain similarity between this piece and Schumann's Toccata, op. 7, which could find a common origin in the playing of Paganini, whom Schumann had travelled to Frankfurt to hear in the month of April 1830 – he began composing the first version of the Toccata the following month. The Chopin and Schumann pieces are exactly contemporary!

It is significant that the three great composers for the piano of this generation: Chopin, Schumann (both born in 1810), and Liszt (1811), were all inspired by Paganini. Schumann began composing adaptations of the great violinist's *Capricci* (1819) in 1832 and published in that same year *6 Studien nach Capriccen von Paganini,* op. 3; the following year he composed six more pieces, which appeared in 1835 as *6 Konzert-Etüden nach Capriccen von Paganini,* op. 10. Liszt wrote his *6 Études d'exécution transcendante d'après Paganini* in 1838: they appeared in 1840. Chopin, as we have seen, responded in his own, typical, manner: he offered no transcription of Paganini's compositions, and therefore no public clue concerning Paganini's influence on his private, inner, world; but silently absorbed into his original style the example of the Genovese magician.

The attention Chopin paid to an instrument other than his own is anything but a coincidence. His reply to his old teacher Elsner (placed at the head of these notes), who was urging him to write an opera on a Polish patriotic subject, shows Chopin refusing to be drawn, and countering with the confession of his real ambition, which was to create a "new world" by reserving everything he had to say, as a musician, exclusively for the medium of the piano. In this light, we can consider that Chopin in his Études was striving to commit to the piano his reaction to virtuosity *à la Paganini* – in the same manner as he decanted the essence of the *bel canto* style in his Nocturnes, brought to his Ballades and Scherzos the epic and dramatic spirit of opera, the breath of the patriotic Cantata to his Polonaises… and his love and admiration for Bach and "old music" generally in the Préludes op. 28. Most nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics perceived Chopin's refusal to try his hand at

theatrical and orchestral forms as a weakness; we should view it instead as proof of his stunning originality… Chopin could doubtless have written for orchestra as well, or as badly, as others if he had put his mind to it; but for those who know how to listen, the strength and passion of his piano-writing encapsulates the emotions and techniques of many of the musical experiences of his time. It is part of his greatness that he had conceived of this idea, and found the courage not to be swayed, even by those he loved and respected, into following the accepted routine for contemporary musicians. We should bear this in mind when evaluating the full message of the 24 Études.

Chopin wrote to Ferdinand Hiller on June 20, 1833: *"I am writing without knowing what my pen is scribbling, because as I write, Liszt is playing one of my Études, and putting honest thoughts out of my head – I wish I could steal his way of playing my own things from him."* This statement is surprising: what was it that made Liszt's manner of playing these pieces so special? Even those with a glancing knowledge of Chopin can hardly suppose that it was because Liszt could play louder and faster than anyone else; that sort of demonstration would have left Chopin cold! We can only surmise that Liszt had found a deeper musical sense to the music: Chopin would not be the last composer that Liszt, that interpreter of genius, would reveal to himself… The more I reflect on this, the more I suspect that Chopin didn't himself realise the full significance of his Opus 10; his reaction to Liszt's playing of it is one clue; another is his disappointment on learning that the young virtuoso Clara Wieck had decided on his fifth Étude (the *"Black Keys"* Study) for the programme of her Parisian concert. On April 25, 1839, he wrote from Marseille to his friend Fontana: *"Did Wieck play my Étude well? Why did she choose that one in particular, the least interesting for those who don't realise that it is played only on the black keys? I wish she'd kept silent!"* In supposing that the only interest of his Study was the exclusive use it made of the black keys (which, be it said in passing, reveals that this piece, so easy to listen to, had presented him as a composer with something of a challenge!) Chopin was mistaken, seemingly oblivious to the grace, elegance, and charm of this sparkling composition! (There is also the possibility that, ten years after its composition, Chopin was eager to place some distance between himself and the Viennese *stile brillante* which had marked many of his youthful compositions…) This is not to say that Chopin, ever the obsessive perfectionist, didn't put every effort into crafting as excellent a Study as possible; it is rather that these works had apparently remained for him… just Studies! And it is in this light that we must consider one of the most controversial aspects of the two sets of Études: the metronome markings!

It must be admitted that these markings, because of the extremely fast tempi they indicate, take performers decidedly out of their comfort zone – to the extent that their reliability has often been called into question. One reads, for example, that metronomes of the 1830s were unreliable, or yet again, that the pulse indicated has been misinterpreted. The subject is rather more complex, however. Let me begin by saying that Chopin, in recommending very fast speeds for his Studies, seems to have been following established practice as regards the tempi of Études: the metronome indications in Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum* are extremely fast, as are those in Moscheles's 24 Études, op. 70. As for J. B. Cramer's Studies, no less a figure than Hans von Bülow balked at their speed when preparing his edition of Selected Studies in 1868: *"With reference to the metronome signs, we cannot conceal that to us they appear excessively fast in the majority of cases – not merely in respect to the time* [= tempo!] *to be taken in practising them, but also to that appropriate to their delivery simply as pieces of music."* Most pianists would say as much of Chopin's markings…

From his very first published work, the Rondo op. 1 brought out by Andrzej Brzezina in Warsaw in 1825, and up until 1836 or 1837, Chopin provided every work he had prepared for publication, without exception, with metronome markings: this comprises the Rondos, the two Concertos and the four concertante works with orchestra, the chamber music, the first four sets of Mazurkas (op. 6, 7, 17 & 24), the first three sets of Nocturnes (op. 9, 15 & 27) and both sets of Études (op. 10 & 25). All editors are concerned, be they in Warsaw, Vienna, Leipzig, Paris, or London. From the mid-1830s, however, there appear one or two significant exceptions: the Grande Valse Brillante*,* op. 18 (1834), the First Ballade*,* op. 23 (1836) and the Two Polonaises (1836) have no metronome indications (the dates given are those of publication). After the Two Nocturnes, op. 27 of 1836 and the Twelve Studies op 25 (1837), Chopin abandoned this practice and never returned to it. This means that not one Waltz, not one Polonaise for solo piano, not one of the four Ballades, nor of the three Impromptus, have metronome markings, none of the three mature Sonatas (op. 35, 58, & 65) either, and only one Scherzo out of the four… Even the three Études Chopin composed in 1840 for the *Méthode des Méthodes* of Moscheles are lacking these markings. This hardly seems like an endorsement (and it can be added that Chopin's companion in arms, Liszt, followed a similar path: every work of his published in Paris from his adolescent years until 1835 comes with metronome markings. After 1835, when Liszt left Paris to return only at rare intervals, he would forego this custom – and his obstinate and militant hostility, in later years, towards conductors of his works who stuck too obstinately to the beat is a matter of historical record).

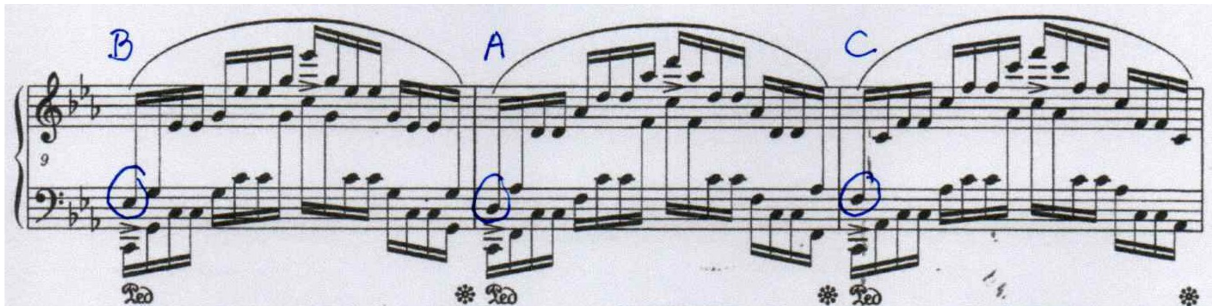
These facts allow today's performers to ignore Chopin's markings, if they wish, and to adopt tempi in accordance with their taste or their capability, since Chopin, on reflection, appeared reluctant to impose such rigid recommendations on his interpreters. There is however some indication that he expected rapid speeds in his Studies. First, the metronome markings indicated in his earlier works (Mazurkas*,* Nocturnes, etc.) are for the most part perfectly plausible: why, therefore, question his suggested tempi only regarding the Studies? The letters of Friederike Müller contain frequent remarks concerning the ever faster speeds that Chopin demanded of her in these works. The young woman had heard Liszt perform several of the Études in his celebrated Viennese concerts in the spring of 1838, and shortly after commencing lessons with Chopin, she wrote to her aunt (November 6-8, 1839): *"Just imagine that all the Études must be taken as fast as Liszt performed them."* Several people who had had the rare privilege of hearing Chopin play remarked on the fact that he could accomplish the most fearsome difficulties with no sign of effort. Müller was present on the occasion when the famous pianist Moscheles called on Chopin, who played for him the Études Nos. 5, 6, 10 and 11, *"so fast, with such lightness of touch and such precision, that Moscheles was astounded."* (Letter of November 15, 1839). And Mendelssohn wrote to his sister Fanny Hensel on October 6, 1835: *"Chopin played his new Studies at the speed of light to the astonishment of the people at Leipzig."* It would therefore be a mistake not to give serious consideration to Chopin's indications, which can prove quite revealing: for example if one plays the first Study at crotchet = 176, as indicated, the work becomes another thing altogether from the simple and cautious running up and down of arpeggios; at the fast speed, snatches of melody appear, hinted at in the score by mysterious accents (and which can be kept, even if one slows the pace in concert performance), leaving the sparkling arpeggios as if in the background. The Sixth Study, in E flat minor, is often played in the style of a Nocturne, whereas if taken at Chopin's indicated speed, it shows itself to be a real Étude, with the continuous semiquavers divided between the hands (for which Chopin painstakingly provided fingerings) suggesting a sort of "Spinning Song" reminiscent of *Gretchen am*

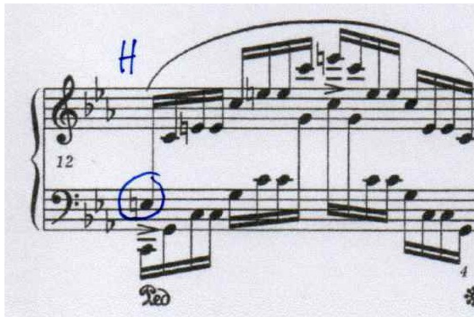
Spinnrade. According to Müller, Chopin considered this Study to be more difficult than the Twelfth (the famous *"Revolutionary")*.

It was to emphasize Chopin's link to Paganini that I chose ***Souvenir de Paganini*** to complete the CD of the 24 *Études*. This work (which Chopin didn't intend for publication; it appeared only in 1881) can be considered as one of those salon amusements with which he delighted his friends throughout his life. It was doubtless composed in the immediate wake of Paganini's stay in Warsaw: Chopin composes a handful of Variations in A major on the theme of *La bella giardiniera,* which Paganini had used for his own *Carnaval de Venise,* op. 10. It is amusing to identify aspects of the violinist's playing which Chopin singles out and mimics: runs of parallel thirds and sixths, *glissandi,* opposition of bowed phrases with plucked strings (*pizzicato*) and so on… Here, Paganini's virtuosity is sublimated into a work of delicate charm.

Before discussing the Preludes*,* one other aspect of the Études should be mentioned: the influence of J. S. Bach for whom we know Chopin had boundless admiration (already in 1827, he had opened his youthful Sonata op. 4 with a direct quote from the second Two-part Invention) … Most commentators have remarked upon the link between the first of the Études and the Prelude in C which opens the first book of the Well-tempered Clavier: Chopin adopts the same key of C major at the outset of his collection of Studies, and also the same continuously modulating arpeggios, alternating between dissonance and resolution, in what is in effect a Toccata; and speaking of toccatas, there is another: the first of the opus 25 set, Étude 13 in A flat major – but one could easily fail to notice the fact, such is the poetic power of the piece (which moved Schumann to compare it with the sound of an Aeolian harp). There are other references to Bach in the 24 Études: the Fourth Study can be heard as a Two-part Invention, for example (and what other composer could have juxtaposed in a single piece and with such success the combined influence of Bach and Paganini?!); and I don't think it is a coincidence if, embedded in the final Étude (No. 24 in C minor) the motif played by the right-hand thumb (bars 9-12) is the B-A-C-H motif, transposed of course into C minor: *E flat – D – F – E natural.*

Example 5: Etude op. 25/12





In fact, the appearance of that E natural means that the B-A-C-H motif underpins the harmonic structure of the whole Étude, as it serves to modulate to C major, the key which occupies much of the piece, whose arpeggios, as mentioned earlier, mirror those of the First Étude, thus bringing the series of 24 Studies to conclusion.

A final word concerning the titles sometimes given to individual Studies (for example *"Revolutionary"* in the case of Study no. 12 in C minor): none of them originate with Chopin… which is not to say that extra-musical ideas do not abound: several of these Studies are so evocative that it is hard for interpreters and listeners alike not to let their imagination roam! I will return to the subject when discussing the Preludes*;* as regards the Études*,* I have already mentioned the "Spinning-song" effect in Étude 6; and the Ninth Étude, in F minor, whose missing first beats give the impression of some sort of nightmarish race, and induces a feeling of breathlessness (Scriabin might have written *affannato* !) hurtles toward passages of contrasting *Forte* and *Piano* with an echo effect which transports us to some wild mountain scenery*;* Étude no. 19 in C sharp minor appears to be a homage to Bellini, a friend of Chopin's: the composer of *Norma* died near Paris on September 23, 1835 at the age of 33, and Chopin alludes to the theme of the dagger scene in Act 2 of *Norma* in the Étude's left-hand melody, in what is one of the great elegiac compositions of the 19th century…

Chopin goes much further in expressing his interest in Bach, and in "old music" in general, in his set of **24 Preludes*,* op. 28,** completed in Majorca (in Palma, and then in the abandoned Carthusian monastery of Valdemossa, isolated in the surrounding mountainside) at the end of 1838 and the first few weeks of 1839. The idea of composing this work came to him perhaps, in the wake of the two journeys he made to Germany in 1834 and 1835. In 1834, Chopin visited the Rhineland in the company of his friend Ferdinand Hiller, another Bach enthusiast, and was able to attend a performance of Handel's oratorio *Deborah;* he also renewed there his acquaintance with Mendelssohn, whom he had known in Paris in 1832, and whom he would see again in 1835. Mendelssohn would have been able to speak about Bach's *Matthew Passion,* which he had rescued

from oblivion in 1829; he could also have mentioned his own *Six Preludes and Fugues,* op. 35, for piano, which he composed between 1827 and 1837, a work in which he tried to adapt the lessons of the *Wohltemperierte Clavier* to the Romantic spirit…

As is well-known, Chopin arrived on Majorca in the company of George Sand, in the month of November 1838; he had with him the incomplete manuscript of his Preludes*,* and his copy of the "48"*,* having set himself the task of bringing to completion his latest work, which was promised to his friend Camille Pleyel, who had offered to publish it himself. Liszt, insightful critic that he was, detected from the outset the Baroque influence, writing in the columns of the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* on May 2, 1842, that the *Preludes* were *"admirable for the diversity, the workmanship, and the* erudition (my underlining) *that is to be found in them."*

In harking back to the musical past, Chopin shows himself a worthy companion of other great Romantics, who were inventing the historical novel, publishing poetry with titles such as *Odes* or *Ballads,* writing down for posterity the legends and fairy tales of folklore which had been transmitted orally over generations, and leaning towards architectural forms inspired by the Middle-Ages… Yet Chopin never falls into the trap of pastiche; on the contrary, he maintains an extraordinary control over his material, and shows himself capable of using the past to breathe new life into his art, which retains its usual evocative power and its daring modern tone (look, for example, at the painful dissonances in Preludes 2, 8 or again 18*,* or the tortuous chromaticism of Prelude 14); and in many ways its prophetic tone (a passage towards the end of Prelude 17*,* for example, (bars 79-84) would not seem out of place as a postlude in one of Hugo Wolf's *Mörike-Lieder!*):

Example 6: Prélude op. 28/17

The "erudition" which Liszt had picked up on can be seen in the various features of Baroque style which Chopin alludes to in many of the Preludes*,* and even in their visual aspect: all the appoggiatura grace-notes are written, uncommonly for Chopin, without a stroke, which gives them an old-fashioned look!

The 24 Preludes occupy a special place in Chopin's output: one may look in vain in them for beautiful *bel canto*-inspired melodies; instead we find a voluntary and assumed archaism, which reveals itself firstly by the presence of melodic lines evoking the ancient modes, for example in their use of the melodic minor scale (sometimes called in French the antique scale) without the sharpened seventh degree; or again, of a sharpened fourth in major scales (bars 22-23 of Prelude 3; bars 17-18 of Prelude 22, left hand (see Example 12)); or the pentatonic scale… Never had Chopin showed himself so un-Italian (except in the case of the famous Prelude 15 (the *"Raindrop"*), where we find the *bel canto* cantilena we expect from his music). Listen, for example, to the pentatonic melodic line of

Prelude 2*,* or the theme of Prelude 24, in D minor without the C sharp; occasionally Chopin drew attention to this, by for instance placing an accent on the A natural in the B minor Prelude 6 (bar 22):

Example 7: Prelude op. 28/6:

or at the conclusion of Prelude 12 by spelling out the descending tetrachord of G sharp minor – without the F double-sharp (bars 79-80):

Example 8: Prelude op. 28/12:

We must tread carefully when deciding what could have sounded "Baroque" to the ears and minds of 180 years ago, or in specifying which composers of that school Chopin could have been familiar with; at the age of 15, he held a post of organist in Warsaw for the Nuns of the Visitation, where he is reported to have played Fugues of the "old masters"; we know with what enthusiasm he listened to Handel's *Ode to Saint Cecilia* in Berlin, in 1828; once settled in Paris, he would have heard Baroque music fairly regularly at the *Concerts spirituels,* or in the Conservatoire concert series, where Habeneck would on occasion set aside his conductor's baton and perform a Bach violin concerto, and where in those years we find mention of performances of Marcello's Psalms, excerpts from *Les Indes galantes* (Rameau), Handel's *Alexander's Feast,* and of course Bach choruses. Chopin possessed his own copy of the *Well-tempered Clavier,* and probably also the volume of *Two-part Inventions* (of which he had quoted that in C minor at the start of his youthful Sonata, op. 4, as we have seen). I believe he must also have known the Suites for solo cello, which had been first published in 1824, in Paris: one of Chopin's most intimate friends was Auguste Franchomme (1808-1884), one of the most distinguished cellists of his day, who must surely have had a copy.

Among the stylistic devices of the Baroque era which found their way into the 24 Preludes (and which sometimes require from us an effort of the imagination to hear them for what they are, so familiar have they become), we can list, in the opening Prelude 1 in C major, the successive arpeggios which recall those of the first Prelude of the *Well-tempered Clavier,* and which had already served as a model for the first Étude; the chordal accompaniment (a typically Baroque practice) of Prelude 4, descending step-wise towards a cadence that sounds very "ecclesiastical" (one could really write the

whole Prelude out on four staves, to admire the perfection of Chopin's part-writing here); perhaps also the slow repeated notes in the right hand of Prelude 6; the final cadence of Prelude 8 (another toccata-like piece), whose grinding dissonance harks back to the final chorus of the *Passion according to Saint Matthew;* the double-dotted rhythm of Prelude 9, associated of course with the French Overture style (and often adopted in performances of the D major Fugue in the first book of the "48"); the hemiolas of Prelude 11 (which must have delighted one Johannes Brahms!) … the monophonic texture of Prelude 14, which could have been suggested by Bach's cello Suites (perhaps the indication: *pesante* was meant to encourage the pianist to imitate the cello timbre on the silvery-toned Pleyel?!); perhaps also the left-hand figuration in Prelude 13 has a similar origin, the pianist using his right hand to add a discant over the bass; the "church style" (sequence of dissonant passing-notes resolving) in the central section of Prelude 15 (bars 60-72: see Example 11); the orchestral recitative of Prelude 18, with the four-semi-quaver figure in augmentation (bar 16), the repeated descending bass of the mysterious pageant that is Prelude 20, which is reminiscent of a Chaconne or ground-bass, and whose noble majesty draws near to Handel… Sometimes it is the texture that stems from Bach, without sounding in the least like him: the case of Prelude 14 has already been mentioned, with its monophonic line, doubled at the octave, seemingly inspired by the Suites for solo cello; Prelude 5 doesn't sound like Bach at all, but the continuous semi-quaver motion in both hands simultaneously comes from the C minor Prelude in the first book of the 48 Preludes and Fugues… all in all, a strange and fascinating combination of ancient and avant-garde!

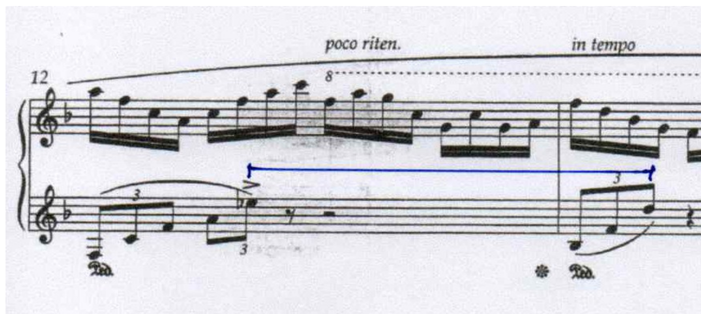
In contrast to other sets of Preludes that Chopin would have known, in which the Prelude was actually designed to precede a work not included in the volume, his own 24 Preludes should not be viewed as pieces to be taken out of context; as Liszt observed, in the article already quoted above: *"These are not only pieces whose purpose, as the title might have us believe, is to form an introduction to other works; these are Poetic Preludes (…) which soothe the spirit in golden musings, and lift it up to the region of the Ideal."* In the case of Chopin, each miniature, however perfect and self-sufficient, is nonetheless an element of the mosaic which makes up the whole. Which of course begs the question of whether the entire Opus 28 should be performed as a set (and it is not the least paradox of this collection formed of generally very brief pieces, that put together, they form perhaps the longest work in Chopin's entire output!) … The easy answer would be that, in the composer's lifetime, no complete performance of the Preludes is on record. Chopin himself performed them as small groups, and he encouraged his pupils to do likewise. That is not to say that they do not form a whole. The piano recital hardly existed then in the form we know it today, and the public would have been used to programmes less demanding of their continuous concentration. In our time, the invention of recording techniques, the nature of concerts and of their schedules have made it possible to listen to this remarkable work in its entirety, the way it was conceived. I could add that these considerations also apply to the contemporary works of Schumann: at the time, no-one played *Carnaval* or the *Kinderszenen* other than as small groups detached from the whole. It is not impossible that the idea of constructing a major work from an assemblage of miniatures came to Chopin from Schumann: we have already seen that Chopin could borrow an idea or a technique from another source without in the least sacrificing the originality of his style!

The Twenty-four Preludes are strictly organised by key: each of the 12 Preludes in major keys is followed by one in its relative minor, and, as in the *Well-tempered Clavier,* every key is included. There is some reason to think that Chopin conceived the Preludes as a succession of linked pairs (it is the reason why they are indexed in this manner on the present recording): thus, where Bach

presents us with pairs of Preludes and Fugues in the same key, Chopin's Preludes come as diptychs formed of major-key Preludes with their relative minor counterparts. These pairs are often linked, even if one shouldn't expect Chopin to be too systematic, and in some cases the link appears to be no more than the proximity of the two keys involved. But Chopin's harmonic thinking tends to treat a given key and its relative as a single "tonal area": thus, the Second Ballade opens in F major and closes in A minor, the second Scherzo begins in B flat minor and ends in D flat major, and the Fantaisie op. 49 takes us from F minor at the start to A flat major at the end. An example from the Preludes shows Chopin's way of proceeding: the linking of Prelude 21 in B flat major and Prelude 22 in G minor. The first three notes of the scale of G minor in descending order which open Prelude 22 are immediately preceded by the first three notes in descending order of the scale of B flat major, which end Prelude 21*,* forming the sequence: *D – C – B flat – A – G*, which binds the two pieces together. Furthermore, in the last 15 bars of Prelude 21, the sequence: *B flat – A – G* (with which the following Prelude begins) is repeated no less than six times, the last time continuing upwards to form a bridge to the next Prelude. There is more: twice in Prelude 21, (bars 50 and 52) the cadential formula places a pronounced accent on the chord of G minor, in preparation of the tonic of Prelude 22. These successive subtleties allow us to consider each Prelude as a pendant to the other. As I have said, not all the Preludes are as intricately bound, but here are a few instances of links which emphasize the progressive tonality which exists between each pair of Preludes: nine out of the twelve Preludes in major keys (i.e. the first of each pair) have a melody line that ends, not on the tonic, but on the mediant, which gives less sense of closure, whereas all but one (Prelude 18) of the minor-key Preludes conclude firmly on the tonic. The fact that Chopin makes such use of melodic minor sequences in his themes draws the major and minor modes close, as they share exactly the same notes. To link the very contrasted Preludes 15 and 16, Chopin writes six *fortissimo* chords which act as a modulating link to the new key. Two chords at the end of Prelude 19 announce the succession of chords which form Prelude 20. The F major arpeggio at the end of Prelude 23 contains an unresolved E flat (to the ears of Chopin's contemporaries this could give no sense of closure at all) … but by lowering the E flat by a semi-tone, we reach the D of the D minor Prelude 24 – and this semitonal progression is prepared in advance in bars 8-9 and 12-13 of Prelude 23:

Example 9a: Prelude op. 28/23, bars 8-9

Example 9b: Prelude op. 28/23, bars 12-13



Less easy to prove, but just as important in my opinion, is the possibility that some of the Preludes are linked by extra-musical ideas, even if it goes without saying that each one attains a level of perfection of form and detail that make them admirable in terms of purely musical logic alone… Chopin was the most reserved and secretive of all the great Romantic composers, and always kept an obstinate silence as to the well-springs of his inspiration. That does not mean that we should consider these short gems as “absolute music” – was it not the same Chopin who once wrote: *“There is no music that does not have a hidden intention”?* But he resolutely left it to his performers and audiences to fathom what he had in mind, leaving each one to interpret, through the prism of his own imagination and sensibility, what lurks beneath the notes. Therein lies, no doubt, one of the secrets of the endlessly renewed freshness and strength of his art, for in this way he obliges us to participate actively in the shared musical experience - listening to Chopin is never a passive occupation!... Where musicologists fear to tread, for want of scientific data, there the interpreter can and must go, to sound the mysteries of that “hidden intention” …

Anyone is free to hear, emerging from the keyboard, religious chants, the tolling and peeling of bells, lullabies, love-songs, the wind in its fury, mysterious processions… So from the very outset of the Preludes*,* the left hand in Prelude 2 broods incessantly on a four-note figuration which is strongly reminiscent of the *Dies irae* (with Chopin, direct quotes are extremely rare, but allusions, more ambiguous, occur more frequently); and that funereal atmosphere is made more explicit at the end (bar 21) with the appearance (for one bar only: such is the art of the miniaturist!) of a Funeral March:

Example 10: Prelude, op. 28/2:

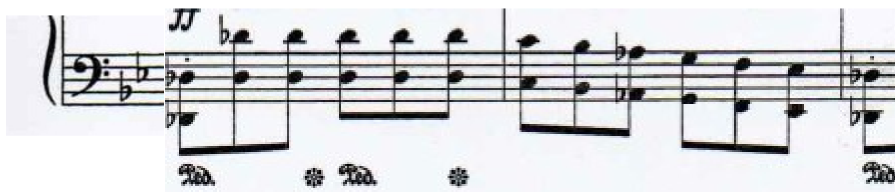
Prelude 10 has fleeting snatches of a mazurka, each time swept away by a cascade of scales. Preludes 15 and 16 form the emotional and structural core of the set (the greater number of very short pieces occurring in the first part of the work, its centre is slightly displaced); as regards Prelude 15 (the *Raindrop Prelude* made famous by George Sand's description), it is a pity that the anecdotal has so often taken the place of more serious consideration: this Prelude is the longest of all, and falls into two distinct parts: the opening, Italianate in feel as said earlier, *"fills our senses with a powerful scent of Paradise"* (to borrow an expression of George Sand); what follows is in great contrast – I cannot help associating this part of the Prelude with a passage from the letter Chopin wrote to a friend, December 14, 1838, from Palma: *"Tomorrow I shall be moving to the admirable cloisters of Valdemosa, where I shall compose in the cell of some old monk, who perhaps had in his soul more fire than I do, but snuffed it out, snuffed it out and extinguished it completely, because he possessed it in vain"…* This middle section, then, rises from the depths of the piano, austere, sombre, *pianissimo,* like an hallucination, with frequent use of perfect fifths that make it sound rather like the Fugue in C sharp minor from book 1 of the "48"*;* the music works up to a frenzy of *fortissimo* chords, that seem to want to modulate, but fall back in exhaustion to where they emerged from… it seems as if the life-force of the "old monk" is being snuffed out; then comes a prayer (when the right hand takes over the musical interest from the left):

Example 11: Prelude op. 28/15:

Right at the end, the initial melody returns, softly, without even the strength to continue to the end of the phrase, like the glimpse of some lost Paradise…(Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger in a brilliant essay, established which of the Preludes had been composed before Chopin arrived in Palma, basing his argument on a list of keys jotted down by Chopin in a corner of manuscript paper – and a *D flat Prelude* is among them; but nothing says that some of them weren't reworked later on. For me, the central part of Prelude 15 reflects the Majorcan experience). George Sand has left an account of Chopin's irritation with her comparison of the repeated note which runs through this piece to the raindrops that were falling on the cloister roof one evening – perhaps he was disappointed that the woman he loved saw something as material as a raindrop (!) in a work so obviously filled with strong emotions and feeling; the repeated note is after all a useful device for linking the two very contrasted sections! Chopin would doubtless have made his own Beethoven's statement concerning the Pastoral Symphony*,* that it was *"mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei" …* The trance-like

ending of Prelude 15 is rudely interrupted by six crashing chords which prepare the frenzy of semiquavers which run through Prelude 16, violent as wind in a storm. Chopin's pedalling indications blur the contours of these gusts of notes; it is important to observe them, because this Prelude must in no way sound like an Étude! ...To continue our search for other hints of extra-musical undercurrents in the Preludes: the last part of Prelude 17 contains eleven accented A flats in the bass, which have often been interpreted as the chimes of a clock leading up to midnight; and bells can be heard again in Preludes 21 and 22: I have already shown the strong link between these two Preludes on purely musical grounds; it is possible that they also contain "hidden intentions" that bind them together! In Prelude 21, the ringing of bells interrupt (from bar 17 on) the beautiful, idyllic melody of the beginning, which never returns; in the violent and agitated Prelude 22, the descending octaves in the left hand (from bar 17):

Example 12: Prelude op. 28/22



sound like an obsessive peel of church bells. What strikes me is the context: what are bells doing in this extremely agitated piece? And to add to the upset, the descending octaves are in D flat major: Chopin couldn't have moved further away from his G minor tonic: this is a strong hint that some emotional undercurrent is at work. My personal interpretation is this: when he returned from Germany in October 1835, Chopin considered himself engaged to a young girl of the Polish aristocracy, Maria Wodzińska. The way this engagement fell through, and the shoddy manner in which he was treated by the Wodziński family, was a deep and humiliating trauma for him, one which George Sand detected, as is clear from her long letter to Chopin's friend Wojciech Grzymała of May 1838. The "happy bells" of Prelude 21 and the "ironic bells" of Prelude 22 could be Chopin's way of confiding to his piano the wedding bells that never rang out for him, and this very intimate defeat… To conclude, we arrive at Preludes 23 and 24: because of the repetitive left-hand figuration, these two Preludes can be heard as lullabies (*Berceuses*): innocent and gentle in Prelude 23 (F major is the key of innocence for Chopin: see the beginning of the Nocturne op. 15 no. 1, and that of the Ballade no. 2 – each time, the idyllic opening is followed by an agitated episode, as in Preludes 23 and 24); – and in the case of Prelude 24, an agitated, even tragic, *Berceuse* in D minor, a key often associated with Death (Mozart's *Requiem,* Schubert's *Death and the Maiden,* Liszt's *Totentanz….*).

Ever since Schumann stated his opinion that the three *fortissimo* D's in the bass which end this Prelude, and the entire cycle, represented three canon shots, his view has been repeated everywhere, with no very satisfactory explanation as to the reason why we suddenly find ourselves on the battlefield. My point is that Schumann never visited Paris, where he could have seen that in the theatres of the French capital, the raising of the curtain at the start of the play is preceded by three sharp raps on the wooden planks of the stage, given by a wooden staff called *"Brigadier"* in French theatrical circles. (The custom goes back to the Middle-Ages, and is still to be seen today, though it is on the wane: see French Wikipédia: "Les Trois Coups"). These raps are a sign that the performance is about to begin and are an injunction to the public to stop talking and pay attention.

(The fact that this is only a local custom doesn't undermine the universal significance of the use Chopin made of it: he never spoke of "hidden intentions" of any sort in his works, but these may constitute a secret, inner world that gives life to his music). I am convinced that this theatrical reference holds the secret of the three D's, which are the composer's *Favete linguis:* the curtain rises, and by this master stroke, Chopin transforms the 24 Preludes into one great Prelude… to what? (to repeat André Gide's question): is it to be interpreted in the Shakespearian sense: *"All the world's a stage",* in which case the Preludes open up to Life? Or is it not rather a Prelude to that great Unknown, Death, which is so often associated with the key of D minor? In that case, this funereal *Berceuse* brings to its conclusion a work that had already opened (Prelude 2) under the sign of Death with its allusion to the *Dies irae…* As everyone knows, Chopin became dangerously ill during his stay on Majorca: it is not too far-fetched to wonder if, as Chopin put the final touches to his Preludes op. 28, he was asking himself whether he was signing his swansong.

I have brought together under the title ***Feuilles d'Album/Album leaves*** (the title is not Chopin's) a handful of small compositions which are usually relegated by genre to the back of the editions of Waltzes, Nocturnes, or Mazurkas, or to volumes under the heading of "Minor Works" … It seemed interesting to complete the CD devoted to the Twenty-four Preludes with other miniatures, dating from Chopin's Paris years. Albums were then all the rage, and musicians, poets, artists, amateurs and great masters alike, were beset with requests to contribute to the Album of whoever was their host for the day. Liszt seems to have resigned himself to go along with this habit, albeit as little as possible, and used to repeat his friend Berlioz's witty pun in referring to these productions as *"albuminations"* … Chopin, on the other hand, for whom the salon with its games and customs was a natural habitat, appears to have embraced these constraints quite good-naturedly, and has left us a number of compositions in the genre, including such well-known pieces as the "Farewell Waltz" and even the Fantaisie-Impromptu. In considering them as a group, one is struck by the superb musical quality of many of these occasional pieces: the ***Presto con leggierezza*** in A flat major (often called Prelude in the editions), written for Pierre Wolff, a pianist from Geneva and close friend of Liszt's, and the ***Cantabile*** in B flat major, both from 1834, are real gems, fleeting *"visions fugitives",* which could almost find a place in the 24 Preludes. The ***Mazur*** in A flat was written for Celina, the daughter of the famous pianist Maria Szymanowska, no doubt as a wedding gift, as it dates from July 1834, month in which the young woman married Adam Mickiewicz (there is a brief note from Mickiewicz asking Chopin to hurry up with his piece, as his wife was getting impatient!). The ***Sostenuto*** in E flat is in fact a miniature Waltz, written in July 1840: it belonged to the Album of the financier Émile Gaillard, whose name is known to lovers of Chopin as the dedicatee of a beautiful Mazurka. The ***Largo*** in E flat dates possibly from the same year, if it is to be identified with a newly composed "March" which Chopin played to Friederike Müller (see her letter of 17 May 1840). The date of the ***Nocturne*** in C minor is unclear, except that Chopin wrote "Paris" underneath it. The title is not his. Various scholars have put forward dates in the early to mid-1830s, while the Chomiński/Turło catalogue gives 1847… An earlier date seems the most probable to me, because Chopin is here emulating the *bel canto* style of his friend Bellini, as if trying to learn the secret of his *melodie lunghe, lunghe, lunghe*; the left-hand accompaniment however is relatively simple, a far cry from Chopin's writing in his late period – and if he writes with his usual grace and charm, the melodic line does not yet match the sophistication of *Casta diva, Ah non credea mirarti,* or indeed Rossini's *Sombres forêts…* It is moving to follow Chopin as he wends his way through the salons of friends and acquaintances, doing his best to charm and to please them. These "Album leaves" were never

intended for publication, and appeared over the years, as and when they were discovered. The exceptions are the group of compositions brought out a few years after his death by his friend Juliusz Fontana, at the request of Chopin's mother and sisters; they bear the opus numbers 66-74. The ***Mazurkas in C major*** and ***G major*** fall into this category; they both belong to the year 1835. Fontana's edition is the only source we have for them, as the manuscripts have since disappeared; but thanks to a hand-written catalogue begun by Ludwika, Chopin's sister, shortly after her brother's death, we know that the Mazurka in C was written for *"madame Hoffmann"* and the Mazurka in G for *"mademoiselle Młokosiewicz",* so it is fair to assume that they also originated as humble Album leaves*,* arranged for publication by Fontana.

The **Prélude op. 45** is often underestimated, because, despite having nothing in common with the 24 Preludes op. 28 apart from the title, it is often placed at the end of editions of Opus 28, or placed just after that work in recordings, and suffers from the shadow cast over it by that major work. For this reason, the Prelude op. 45 has been placed symbolically as far away from the Twenty-four Preludes as possible on this recording, because it is in fact a marvellous work, mysterious and elegant as was its composer. It was conceived in 1844 as Chopin's contribution to a collective Album, the profits of which were destined for the Bonn Beethoven Committee, which was struggling to find the funds necessary to erect a commemorative statue of Beethoven in 1845. This Prelude has been much discussed for its harmonic subtlety (following the lead of Chopin himself, whose only known comment on this new work was that it "modulated nicely"!), a harmonic subtlety which looks forward to Mahler and the famous *Adagietto* from the Fifth Symphony. But one should also pay attention to the originality of the intertwined volutes of arpeggios, which rise from the bass as an accompaniment, and on reaching the high register, evolve into a melody whose long and melancholy appoggiatura covers the start of the next arpeggio… other composers might have spoken of arabesques.

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Paris, January 2024.

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