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Chopin' s Prelude in C Major
Revisited: Integrating Sound and
Symbol

ABSTRACT: This article presents comparisons of several recordings and analyses of Chopin's Prelude in C Major, Op. 28, No. 1. My intent is to demonstrate how including recordings in the analytical process provides greater insights than those yielded by traditional analysis. The *intersections* and *digressions* between performances and written analyses are examined to reveal the relationships between the score and its sonic and symbolic interpretations.

KEYWORDS: performance, analysis, Chopin, Prelude, intersections, digressions

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[1.1] In this study, I explore the relationship between recorded performances and written analyses as a resource for analysis. The comparison of recordings is a tool that can influence how we approach analysis and teach our courses, a tool no less significant than those involving theoretical methodologies of form, harmony, and rhythm.⁽¹⁾ As the prominent theorist Joel Lester (1995) states:

Just as analysts use scores as avenues to the pieces they analyze, refer to other analyses with approbation or disapproval, they can—and should, I would argue—refer to performances in order to get at the essence of the pieces they analyze. ... The vast repertoire of recordings remains a resource barely noticed by theoretical discourse.⁽²⁾

[1.2] A close reading of the historical record supports the notion that we realize music through *both* sound and symbol. Perhaps, therefore, we need to reconsider our ideas about analysis and how we teach it to our students. As musicologist Nicholas Cook (2001) recently notes:

[The] most obvious way of studying music as performance is, quite simply, to study those traces or representations of past performances that make up the recorded heritage, thereby unlocking an archive of acoustical texts comparable in extent and significance to the notated texts ... ⁽³⁾

[1.3] Toward this end, I use several recordings and written analyses of Chopin's Prelude in C Major, Op. 28, No. 1. ⁽⁴⁾ My intent is not to suggest that analysis "corrects" performance (or vice versa); instead, I explore the *intersections* and *digressions* between performances and analyses, an approach that provides greater insights than traditional analysis. An intersection occurs when a performance in some demonstrable way projects (or "supports") an aspect of the music revealed in an analysis. A digression, on the other hand, occurs when performances and analyses have nothing in common, or even contradict one another. ⁽⁵⁾ My discussion about the integration of sound and symbol focuses initially on local levels and is followed by an examination of large-scale events. It will be helpful to follow the score as you listen to the recorded excerpts and examine the analyses (see attached score: [\[DjVu\]](#) [\[GIF\]](#)).

Part I: The Opening Four Measures

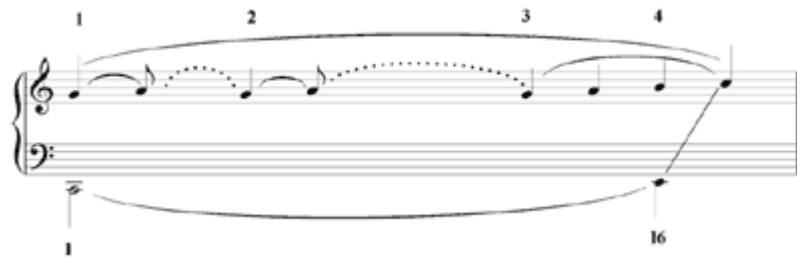
Neighbors, Passing Tones, or Something Else

[2.1] We begin by comparing two different recordings of bars 1–4 of Chopin's Prelude. The first recording is by Grigory Sokolov ⁽⁶⁾ and the second by Alicia DeLarrocha. ⁽⁷⁾ As you listen, focus on the opening G-A gestures in the upper line. Play the opening 12 measures of Sokolov ([Clip #1](#)) followed by DeLarrocha ([Clip #2](#)).

[2.2] The performances differ in their interpretations of the upper line. Sokolov projects a legato, almost seamless connection between the G-A figures, whereas DeLarrocha articulates a break after each A, creating a disjointed motion. Now consider how these performances intersect with published analyses. Examples 1a and 1b show analyses by Roger Graybill. ⁽⁸⁾ Both illustrate a motion through a fourth, from

[2.3] Example 2a presents my reading, which adopts a “both/and” approach to the role of A in bars 1–2. The first and second slurs in the soprano voice indicate a two-note grouping (G-A). The eighth-note flags indicate that the As dissipate; the dotted lines, on the other hand, suggest a *tenuous* resolution back to the Gs. The longer slur in bars 3–4 indicates that A now functions as part of a passing motion. The As in bars 1–2, therefore, function as neighbor notes, but also embody a potential passing function that emerges as a literal passing tone in the motion of bars 3–4.

Example 2a. 揃 oth/And?approach, bars 1 – 2



(click to enlarge)

[2.4] All three analyses make assertions about the piece based on what we *see* in the score. [Sokolov's interpretation](#) intersects with Example 1a, the *complete* neighboring motion, because he connects the A to the G of each gesture (with the aid of the damper pedal). Both Example 1a and Sokolov's interpretation are *plausible*, because they represent an acceptable rendition of the notes and their respective functions.

[2.5] [DeLarrocha's interpretation](#) is closer to Example 1b and, furthermore, is more faithful to the notation of Chopin's score. She detaches the A from the following G of each gesture by lifting her hands and the damper pedal. The As sound clipped and the space between them and the following Gs seem at odds with the neighbor-note analysis. (The pedaling indications in the score also suggest a detached quality between the As and Gs.)⁽¹⁰⁾ Further, the sixteenth note rests on the downbeat of each bar are absent in Sokolov's interpretation, while they are articulated in DeLarrocha's gestures. The subtle differences in articulation between these performances communicate the expressive character of the passage. In DeLarrocha's clipped rendition, the gestures sound out of breath, urgent and agitated, corresponding to Chopin's *Agitato* marking; in Sokolov's legato rendition the gestures sound calmer, more relaxed, almost lyrical.

[2.6] A performance by Constance Keene⁽¹¹⁾ presents a third possibility (listen to [Clip #7](#)). In contrast to DeLarrocha's clipping of the As, which suggests the interrupted-passing gestures, Keene's articulation, though still detached, continues the influence of the As over a longer span, as shown in my analysis (Example 2a). In other words, the As in Keene's rendition sound as if they are moving through a larger

linear progression. It is worth remembering that the notion of a linear progression—from the German *Züg*—involves a sense of pulling or drawing. The As dissipate in DeLarrocha’s performance, while Keene’s As both descend at the surface and pull forward to C at the foreground.

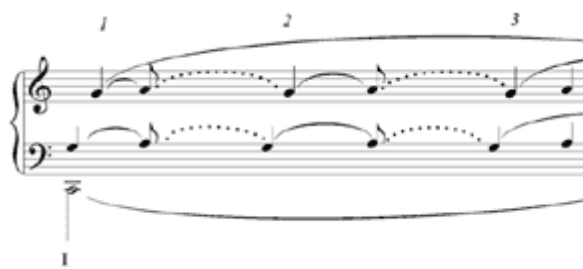
[2.7] Thus far I have considered the gestures in terms of neighboring motions, interrupted-passing tones, and as a combination, and have demonstrated how these interpretations intersect or digress with various performances. But these terms do not always fully capture the subtle qualities expressed in a performer’s articulations. The repeated As in DeLarrocha’s interpretation seem to fling up and rebound from the previous Gs, *against* the pull of the linear progression.⁽¹²⁾ Notions of neighboring or interrupted passing are possible, but less dynamic, less inclined to consider the subtle physiological actions of the performer. Are the As in DeLarrocha’s recording something else? The labels “neighbor” and “passing” note are often limited in their applicability. A broader analysis that considers recorded performances expands our understanding into dimensions that extend beyond these general, theoretical labels.

Two additional recordings

[3.1] I now consider other aspects of Chopin’s Prelude in two additional recordings. The first is by Ivan Moravec⁽¹³⁾ ([Clip #3](#)), which unveils an interplay left unexpressed by the previous recordings—the echo by the soprano of the primary motive in the tenor. (Example 2b shows the paths of these melodies. Example 3, from an analysis by Wallace Berry, indicates the rhythmic relationship between these strands. Both melodies conflict with the metric structure, a conflict that contributes to the sense of agitation and forward drive. As Berry explains, 掙 he performer who stresses the initiating bass note of each measure in the interest of 慶 larifying?the [harmonic and metric] situation misses the point.?sup>(14)

Example 2b. Offset upper and inner voices

Example 3. Berry 掙 rhythmic reading (1985, p. 18)



(click to enlarge)



(click to enlarge)

[3.2] The next performance, a historic recording by Ferruccio Busoni,⁽¹⁵⁾ which took place sometimes during the early 1900s, not only exaggerates the assertions made by Berry, but it also seems foreign to Chopin's score. Listen to [Clip #5](#) and consider how far a performer might reasonably depart from the composer's intentions.

[3.3] Busoni distorts the rhythm by bringing in the mid-bar upper-melody gesture a bit too early. In addition, he shifts the emphasis unpredictably from the upper line to tenor line melody throughout the performance of the piece, adding an element of uncertainty. The starting-and-stopping effect results in a disjointed series of motivic gestures. Was Busoni thinking of a performance played on a stringed instrument? His erratic, strummed-like gestures may affirm such a view. His performance presents an interpretation far removed from modern performance practice and certainly conveys Chopin 扭 agitation.⁽¹⁶⁾

Part II: Opening Eight Measures

4 + 4 Groupings, Initial Arpeggiation or Something Else

[4.1] We now consider two recordings and analyses of bars 1–8. Listen to the performances by Sokolov ([Clip #1](#)) and Louis Lortie⁽¹⁷⁾ ([Clip #4](#)). Now consider the analysis by Wallace Berry (Example 4), which shows a progression from I to V divided into two 4-bar units. He states that the Prelude's "basic course of action . . .

creates this 4 + 4 division. . . . the upper-voice melody is in place in the first 3 bars while the tonic is clearly set, and in this sense m. 1 points to m. 4, and analogously m. 5 to m. 8.”⁽¹⁸⁾ As his example illustrates, Berry interprets measures 2–3 and measures 6–7 as parenthetical, a reading that underscores a 4+4 grouping of measures.

Example 4. Berry’s 4+4 analysis of mm 1 – 8 (1985, p. 20)



(click to enlarge)

Example 5. Forte and Gilbert’s initial arpeggiation reading of mm. 1 – 8 (1982, p. 193)



(click to enlarge)

[4.2] Forte and Gilbert (Example 5) read an initial arpeggiation in the upper voice from G to E; their notation suggests that the goal of the motion is E in measure 5 rather than C in measure 4.⁽¹⁹⁾ In other words, the C is a note “along the way,” which (in contrast to Berry’s analysis) occurs within a broader sweep from G to E; the overall motion continues *through* the C in m. 4 up to the E in m. 5.

[4.3] Berry’s analysis intersects with the performance by Sokolov, who highlights the 4 + 4 grouping by slightly lingering on C in m. 4 and decreasing the dynamic level before the line reaches E in m. 5. These expressions make C sound like a goal and E as a new beginning. Lortie, on the other hand, pushes through C in m. 4 and the following E without any change in tempo or dynamics until m. 6; curiously, his motion seems to push toward D as the goal of the phrase. His performance, therefore, adds a new layer of interpretation that digresses from Berry’s 4+4 analysis and Forte/Gilbert’s interpretation of an initial arpeggiation.

[4.4] The interplay of motives also defines the two-part division of the phrase. In Sokolov’s performance, the G-A motives ascend to the C and are answered by

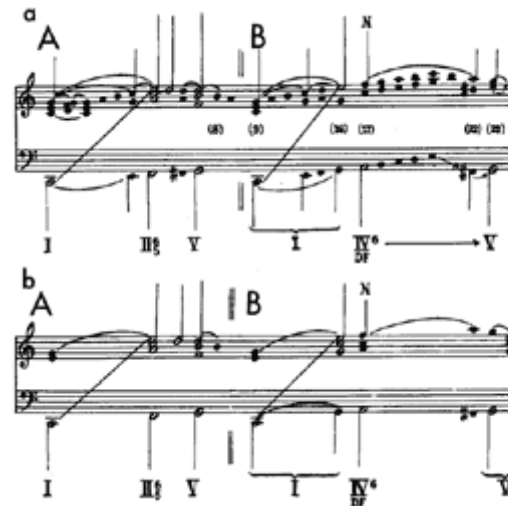
repetition in a consequent phrase (mm. 9?4), followed by a coda (m. 25 杆 nd). The analyses by Berry and Salzer differ in that each places the phrase expansion at a different point in the consequent phrase (Examples 7 and 8).⁽²⁰⁾

Example 7. (Berry, 1985, p. 19)



(click to enlarge)

Example 8. (Salzer, 1962, p. 279)



(click to enlarge)

[5.2] As shown in Example 7, Berry suggests a 4 + 10 + 2 grouping for the consequent phrase and begins the structural predominant (ii6/5) in bar 13; this marks the beginning of a weak (4-bar) hypermeasure. The predominant leads to the registral highpoint in bar 21 and closing dominant in bars 23–24. Salzer's interpretation (Example 8), on the other hand, designates the IV⁶ chord in bar 17 as the structural predominant, which coincides with a strong hypermeasure (bars 17–20). Compared to Berry, Salzer's analysis divides the consequent phrase into two 8 + 8 tonal motions. Notice that the beginnings of both predominant areas coincide with Chopin's expressive markings, a crescendo in bar 13 and a stretto in bar 17.

[5.3] Listen now to two recordings, by Ivo Pogorelich⁽²¹⁾ (Clip #6) and by Constance Keene (Clip #7). Each emphasizes Salzer's predominant, but in different ways.⁽²²⁾ Pogorelich discreetly slips into the beginning of the predominant area (bar 17) by reducing slightly the tempo and dynamic level, before reinitiating a gradual surge to

the climactic highpoint in bar 21. Keene, on the other hand, pauses at the end of bar 16 and then freely realizes the score by placing the inner-voice E on the downbeat. This “revision” dramatically highlights Salzer’s reading of the predominant in a pronounced manner.

[5.4] All of the recordings I am familiar with (except for Sokolov) seem to intersect more with Salzer’s reading than Berry’s. Many begin to increase the momentum of the phrase beginning in bar 17 with a stretto and crescendo. This is a significant juncture in the piece, the place where the upper line has gathered sufficient energy to rise unencumbered from E to the climactic highpoint C in m. 21.

[5.5] As appealing as Salzer’s reading appears to be to the performers, we must also acknowledge that Berry’s bass-line graph has something important to say. His analysis considers that the leap in the bass (bars 21–22) highlights F \sharp , which can be understood as a chromatic passing tone—at a deeper level—from the F in bar 13. The structural bass F-F \sharp -G is consequently an expanded version of the bass line in the cadential motion in the antecedent phrase (bars 5–7). Berry’s structural predominant may exemplify an analytical situations in which, as William Rothstein puts it, “the performer needs to conceal structure, rather than bring it out.”⁽²³⁾ Analysis can reveal possibilities for both performer and analyst to consider, and both may choose to play with or against the various interpretations.

Part IV: Conclusion

[6.1] The comparisons presented here between performative and written interpretations of Chopin’s Prelude reveal relationships between the score and its sonic and symbolic realizations. As Lawrence Rosenwald (1993) states,

[A performance moves] precisely from a consideration of various actual performances back to a fresh analysis of the piece 梈ot the piece itself ? but the piece considered as

something existing in the relation between its notation and the field of its performances.⁽²⁴⁾

[6.2] The consideration of the score and its possible realizations also illuminates the different goals of performative and written interpretations. When we shift our analytical focus from what we *see* in the score to what we *hear* in performances—the expressive, unique subtleties of a performance—we acquire insights other than those perhaps captured in a written interpretation, that is, an interpretation that may have not been as readily apparent in the analyst’s imagined performance.

[6.3] For performers, written interpretations may encourage them to consider new interpretive possibilities they had not previously realized, or a written interpretation may simply reveal compositional insights about the piece not necessarily intended to be realized in a performance. Taking performative and analytical aspects into account allows us to acknowledge what each has to offer in the analytical process.

[6.4] The integration of sound and symbol is an approach that is not so much about getting things right as it is about revealing the interpretive possibilities that lie within a musical passage. We will always make assumptions about how a piece sounds, based on what we read and see in the score; our analytical insights, however, can only be enriched through the sonic expressions revealed in the vast repertoire of recordings.