

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) Ten Preludes Op.23

1. F-sharp minor: *Largo*
2. B-flat major: *Maestoso*
3. D minor: *Tempo di minuetto*
4. D major: *Andante cantabile*
5. G minor: *Alla marcia*
6. E-flat major: *Andante*
7. C minor: *Allegro*
8. A-flat major: *Allegro vivace*
9. E-flat minor: *Presto*
10. G-flat major: *Largo*

Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote most of these ten Preludes in the first year of his marriage to Natalia. After several years of depression and writer's block following the disastrous 1897 premiere of his First Symphony, Rachmaninoff's creative spirit had returned with full force. His Piano Concerto No.2 (which today is one of the all-time favourite concertos) was completed in 1901, and Rachmaninoff was as happy as he had ever been. Usually he was a severely self-critical and careful composer, but now he seemed to be overflowing with musical ideas. Many of them came out in the form of short piano pieces, each a self-contained gem, and Rachmaninoff named them Preludes.

A 'prelude' had long outgrown its original purpose as an introduction to something else. Chopin's Op.28 Preludes (which appeared in 1839) popularized the notion of a prelude as a kind of mini tone poem for the piano; its subject was a musical key, or rather a mood and atmosphere created in a particular key. The traditional thing to do was to write a prelude for each of the 24 possible major and minor keys, as Bach had done (twice) in *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Rachmaninoff didn't start out with this intention, but he was careful to cover a range of different keys in these ten preludes, alternating major and minor, and he avoided C-sharp minor, the key of his famous Prelude (Op.3 No.2) from ten years earlier. In 1910 he would write a further set of thirteen Preludes, Op.32, covering all the remaining keys.

Although they are often performed separately, as encores or 'fillers' in concert programs, the ten Op.23 Preludes make a good cycle, about half-an-hour long, when played together. Each Prelude is a self-sufficient work, so listening to all ten is like reading an anthology of short stories; each has a distinct setting and characters, but there is an overall form and style that binds them together. Most of them have a three-part structure – an initial melody and textural idea that builds up in a 'wave'; a contrasting central episode; and a return to the mood of the opening.

The first prelude, in F-sharp minor, sneaks in without introduction – a mournful song, rather calm and understated compared with what is to follow. The B-flat major Prelude is an effusive celebration, cascading up and down the keyboard. The D minor Prelude is a minuet; its D major counterpart a dreamy nocturne. The powerful, militaristic G minor Prelude is the most well-known of the set. Following this stern march is the Prelude in E-flat major, which bubbles with joy

– Rachmaninoff said that this music came to him on the day his first daughter was born. The next three preludes are more like études, full of dizzying arrays of notes. The E-flat minor Prelude is especially tricky, as the right hand has to maintain a rapid two-voice texture on its own throughout at a seemingly impossible tempo. The final Prelude in G-flat major returns to the quiet calm of the first, and seems to tiptoe away.

George Antheil (1900–1959) *Sonata Sauvage*

1. A la negre: *Allegro vivo*
2. Snakes
3. Ivory: *Prestissimo*

The piano is an amazingly expressive instrument, capable of the most curvy, lyrical sounds, almost like the human voice. But with all effort that pianists and composers go to in creating smooth, round-edged music on this instrument, we sometimes forget that the piano is a machine.

George Antheil had a solid classical training as a pianist – his teacher, like Rachmaninoff’s teacher, had been a student of Franz Liszt, so he knew all the tricks and techniques for making the piano sing. But that wasn’t what he wanted to do. It was the 1920s, and he was an American in Europe, wanting to establish himself as a leading artist of the avante-garde. Music, he believed, ought to reflect the age of the machine.

With the support of a patron, Mary Louis Curtis Bok, George Antheil based himself in Berlin and travelled around Europe giving piano recitals. His repertoire included music by Chopin, Debussy, Stravinsky (his idol) and his own compositions, including his first piano sonata, *Sonata Sauvage*. Audiences went wild – with enthusiasm, with disgust, or simply with a half-crazed excitement at the audacity of this young American, playing the piano like a machine. There were ovations, there were riots; Antheil says he sometimes placed a loaded revolver on top of the piano when he performed to keep the audience quiet – one can hardly imagine that doing much to calm them down.

The ‘Savage Sonata’ is an aptly named ten-minute work in three movements. It taps into the musical Primitivism in vogue at that time, made famous by Stravinsky’s score for the ballet *The Rite of Spring*. This was a harsh, raw style, fusing what sounded like the savage, untamed sounds of non-Western music with the noises of modern, industrial life – the hammering of steel construction, the roar of the aeroplane. After Antheil performed his *Sonata Sauvage* (along with his *Airplane Sonata*) in Paris in 1923, a newspaper printed a caricature of the composer operating a steam-driven piano.

The Sonata uses ragtime syncopation (particularly in the first movement), dense note clusters, plenty of wild glissandos up and down the keyboard, and repeated stabbing chords. The rhythm is forceful and uncompromising, as well being clunky and jarring. It is constructed like a pre-fabricated building – large slabs of music thrown together with no effort made to hide the joins. The third

movement is absurdly short, deliberately upsetting the expected balance of the sonata. This is modern life, this is the industrial world, expressed simply as it is, without beautification.

Later on (in the infamous *Ballet Mécanique* of 1926), Antheil would turn to actual machines – player pianos and aeroplane propellers – to make this kind of music. But there is something quite powerful about watching a human performer at a normally expressive musical instrument creating such inhuman sounds. Antheil marks several passages in the score “xylophonic”, and the pianist is required to bash at the keys in all kinds of unconventional ways, with fists and palms as well as fingers. Antheil tended to finish his concerts with his own works, probably partly because his hands needed time to recover after playing them.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) Piano Sonata in A Major D.959

1. *Allegro*
2. *Andantino*
3. Scherzo: *Allegro vivace* – Trio: *Un poco più lento*
4. Rondo: *Allegretto*

After the ‘short stories’ of Rachmaninoff’s Preludes and the ‘instruction manual’ of Antheil’s *Sonata Sauvage*, Schubert’s A Major Piano Sonata (D.959) is undoubtedly a novel. Schubert was largely known during his lifetime as a composer of short songs, but much of his music explores longer forms, following the example of Beethoven. Schubert never met Beethoven, but he was a torch-bearer at his funeral in 1827. The following year (which was to be the last of his own life), Schubert wrote a trilogy of piano sonatas, all epic works spanning half-an-hour or more, and all inspired in some way by Beethoven’s sonatas.

This sonata begins with a strait-laced classical theme, quite Beethovenian in its simplicity and forthrightness, little more than a collection of chords with a plunging bass note. But directly after the first cadence, a sense of uneasiness steals in – you can feel it in the harmony, an unexpected note, jarring slightly. It’s little more than a raised semitone, but it keeps coming back, and it feels like the constant tightening of a screw in our psyche. This is a Schubert sonata, so of course there are plenty of long-breathed melodies to explore; but, like the archetypal Romantic wanderer, we can never be free of that sense of discomfort. That edgy tendency of the harmony to rise a semitone haunts the movement right to its end.

The second movement, marked *Andantino*, begins in an empty melancholy. The wandering has stopped – the music feels static, the right hand melody circling around itself, the left hand accompaniment always falling back to the same notes. This goes on for several minutes, like a train of thought lost in some dark obsession. And then something erupts. The middle of this movement is extraordinary – a huge climax of trills, runs and thundering bass notes. And always the harmony is pushing upwards again from below, tightening the screws so that the music cries out in agony. Stabbing chords, silences, and then the melancholy opening melody returns softly, like a funeral procession.

The plodding chords that end the *Andantino* become bubbles bursting all over the keyboard at the start of the Scherzo. This movement has a tone of light-hearted frivolity, although once again the harmony won't allow us to settle, but has the music jumping around between many different keys. The central Trio section (slightly slower) echoes the chord and bass note motif with which the sonata began.

The final Rondo is modeled on the structure of one of Beethoven's rondos (from his Sonata No.16 in G major) and its melody is from one of Schubert's earlier sonatas (Sonata in A minor D.537). This is a typical Schubert tune – just the kind of melody we would expect to hear in a happy song about spring or love. The theme is varied inventively at each return, making this movement sound a little like 'Theme and Variations'. Eventually it comes back in its original form, and we look set for pleasant, homely ending. But the theme stops abruptly. There is an awkward silence. It tries again, stops, tries a different key, starts to feel lost. Here we are at the end of the sonata, and that deeply buried ache from the first movement has made itself felt again. So the music runs away, *Presto*, towards a decisive finish, bringing back the same chords and plunging bass note that began the sonata. The book is shut.

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