

เพรลูด ของรัคมานินอฟ ในแง่มุมของสังคีตลักษณ์ซ้ำความ

Rachmaninoff's Preludes as a Cyclic Work

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Abstract

For over 18 years during the period 1892 to 1910, Sergei Rachmaninoff composed the Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2; 10 Preludes, Op. 23; and 13 Preludes, Op. 32. The key organization of Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes seems random at first glance, not based on any systematic order, as are the sets of Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and Frédéric Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28. However, they consist of all the different major and minor keys and are uniquely integrated by cyclic manipulation of tonal relationships and thematic ideas. While they share numerous features, such as the use of common tones/chords, stepwise motion, chromatic lines, intervallic motives, and a certain rhythmic pattern, they also present divergent elements, such as bold key changes, irregular inclusion of relative- and parallel-key relationship, and effective contrasts in various aspects in many of consecutive preludes. The set of Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes is organized in his own unique, original, and meaningful system and conceptual design, which the author believes is highly successful as an integral, cyclic composition.

Keywords: Rachmaninoff / 24 Preludes / Cyclic Composition

บทคัดย่อ

เซอร์เกย์ รัคมานินอฟ ได้ประพันธ์บทเพลงประเภท เพรลูด ในช่วงเวลา 18 ปี ตั้งแต่ปี ค.ศ. 1892 ถึง 1910 ประกอบด้วยบทเพลง เพรลูด โอปุส 3 หมายเลข 2 เพรลูด 10 บท โอปุส 23 และเพรลูด 13 บท โอปุส 32 การเลือกใช้ท่วงทำนองและเสียงในบทเพลงเพรลูดทั้ง 24 บทของรัคมานินอฟ ไม่ได้มีระบบที่ชัดเจนเหมือนกับ

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ผลงานชุด เวล เทมเพอร์ คลาเวียร์ ของบาค หรือ ผลงานเพรลูด 24 บท โอปุส 28 ของโชแปง แต่มีการใช้ กุญแจเสียงเมเจอร์และไมเนอร์ครบทุกกุญแจเสียง โดยผสมผสานใช้หลักความสัมพันธ์ชั่วระยะของกุญแจเสียง และทำนองหลัก ถึงแม้ว่าบทเพลงชุดนี้จะมีคุณลักษณะหลายอย่างใกล้เคียงกัน เช่น การใช้คอร์ดร่วมและ โน้ตร่วม การเคลื่อนทำนองตามขั้น แนวทำนองแบบครึ่งเสียง หน่วยย่อยที่สร้างจากขั้นคู่เสียง และรูปแบบการใช้จังหวะที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ แต่ยังคงมีองค์ประกอบที่แตกต่างกันออกไป เช่น การเปลี่ยนกุญแจเสียงอย่างฉับพลัน การเลือกใช้กุญแจเสียงร่วมและกุญแจเสียงขนานอย่างอิสระ และการแสดงออกถึงความแตกต่างของ บทเพลงเพรลูดลำดับที่ติดกัน บลเพลงชุดเพรลูด 24 บท ของรัคมานินอฟ จัดองค์ประกอบอย่างมีเอกลักษณ์ และมีความหมายเฉพาะตัว แสดงออกถึงความเป็นบทเพลงประเภทสังคีตลักษณะซ้ำความ ที่มีความสัมพันธ์กัน อย่างลึกซึ้งและลงตัวในแง่มุมของโครงสร้างการประพันธ์

คำสำคัญ: รัคมานินอฟ / เพรลูด 24 บท / สังคีตลักษณะซ้ำความ

Introduction

Numerous composers have written cycles of pieces in all 24 keys. The first example may be Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Books I and II (1722, 1742); 24 sets of preludes and fugues in each book are written in the order of alternating parallel major and minor keys, starting with C major and C minor and moving up a semitone chromatically. Frédéric Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28 (1835–1839) also starts in C major and then, pairing with its relative key of A minor, moves up following the circle of fifths.

Rachmaninoff's Preludes, Op. 3, No. 2, Op. 23, and Op. 32 were written in three different periods, over 18 years. They consist perfectly of all the different major and minor keys. The Prelude in c-sharp minor was composed in 1892 shortly after he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory. It was published as the second piece of the five-piece set of *Morceaux de Fantaisie*, Op. 3. According to Max Harrison, it is unlikely that he had any thought at that time of writing a complete set covering all the keys.² The 10 Preludes, Op. 23, emerged about 10 years later, No. 5 in 1901, and the rest in 1902–1903, when Rachmaninoff had already

² Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 112.

attained international fame as both a pianist and a composer. Yoon-Wha Roh states that “by the time he wrote Ten Preludes, Op. 23, Rachmaninoff was aware of Chopin’s and Scriabin’s Twenty-Four Preludes in each key. Although he still had doubts about writing the full set, he deliberately differentiated the keys of the Ten Preludes in Op. 23”³ The 13 Preludes of Op. 32 were written in rapid succession between August 23 and September 10, 1910. Rachmaninoff was at the very height of his powers as a composer.

Valentin Antipov, the editor of Rachmaninoff’s complete works for piano, affirms that “in spite of the apparently loose timespan over which it was written, the cycle of “24 Préludes” was initially, or at least from an early stage, created as an integral composition, held together by a definite scheme of construction.”⁴ He believes that the composer created the cycle of “24 Préludes” precisely as a series of “concealed” variations on his own Prélude in C-sharp minor.⁵ This article will examine the validity of Antipov’s assertion that the 24 Preludes are an integral composition and can be regarded as a series of “concealed” variations of the first Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2 by focusing on the aspects of unity and contrast in the Preludes.

Unifying Factors

First, Rachmaninoff’s cycle of 24 Preludes does not begin in C major and seems to be organized in no systematic order of keys, like those of J. S. Bach and Chopin. Rachmaninoff mainly organized the 24 Preludes in the sequence of alternating minor and major keys, including four pairs of relative keys and five pairs of parallel keys. Interestingly, the first and last preludes of Op. 23 (Nos. 1 & 10) are in the enharmonically parallel keys of f-sharp minor and G-flat major as well as having the same tempo marking of *Largo*. Moreover, the very first Prelude in c-sharp minor, Op. 3, No. 2 and the very last Prelude in D-flat major, Op. 32, No. 13 are in enharmonically parallel keys.

³ Yoon-Wha Roh, “A Comparative Study of the Twenty-Four Preludes of Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Rachmaninoff” (DM dissertation, Indiana University, 2015), 8.

⁴ Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff, *Complete Works for Piano, Volume 3: 24 Préludes Op. 3, No. 2, Op. 23, Op. 32 (SR 58)*, ed. Valentin Antipov (Moscow: Russian Music Publishing, 2017), VIII.

⁵ *Ibid.*, X.

Several other consecutive pairs of preludes are also related, sharing at least one common tone in their tonic chords, for example, Op. 3, No. 2 and Op. 23, No. 1, sharing a C-sharp as a common tone. Some consecutive preludes with a remote relationship begin on the concluding note of the previous prelude (e.g., Op. 23, Nos. 2 & 3; Op. 23, Nos. 8 & 9; and Op. 32, Nos. 1 & 2). The last pair of Preludes, Op. 32, No. 12 in g-sharp minor and Op. 32, No. 13 in D-flat major, also seems very remote from each other but is united by an enharmonic tone: the tonic G-sharp of No. 12 as the enharmonic dominant A-flat of No. 13.

In addition to single notes as a common tone, common chords and tempo changes connect two consecutive preludes (e.g., an F-sharp diminished seventh chord at the end of Op. 23, No. 7 reappearing in Op. 23, No. 8). At the end of Op. 23, No. 9, a G-flat major chord appears with the change of tempo from *Presto* to *Adagio*, preparing a calm *Largo* start of Op. 23, No. 10.

The other significant element linking the 24 Preludes is the use of cyclic motives, which are two thematic constituents of the Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2, that is, the opening three notes, A-G#-C#, and the four descending chromatic notes as the middle-section theme, E-D#-D#-C#; they are called Motive A and Motive B, respectively, in this article (Example 1).

Example 1 Motive A in b. 1 and Motive B in b. 14 of Op. 3, No. 2.

Motive A

Musical notation for Motive A, Op. 3, No. 2, measures 1-3. The tempo is marked **Lento**. The music is in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). The first three notes of the right hand are circled in red: A4, G#4, and C#5. The dynamic is **ff**. The bass line consists of a descending chromatic line: E4, D#4, D#4, C#4.

Motive B

Musical notation for Motive B, Op. 3, No. 2, measures 14-17. The tempo is marked **Agitato**. The music is in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). The first four notes of the right hand are circled in blue: E4, D#4, D#4, and C#4. The dynamic is **mf**. The bass line consists of a descending chromatic line: E4, D#4, D#4, C#4.

For the sake of brevity, only the last Prelude, Op. 32, No. 13 is discussed in this article as the most significant example of the cyclic use of the two motives. The original Motive A: A-G#-C# appears as B \flat -A \flat -D \flat in the inner voice of the opening theme in bars 1-2 (Example 2).

Example 2 Motive A in Op. 32, No. 13, b. 1-2.

The image shows a musical score for the first two bars of the Prelude in C major, Op. 32, No. 13 by Frédéric Chopin. The tempo is marked 'Grave' and the dynamics are 'mf'. The score is in common time (C). The right hand plays a descending eighth-note scale starting on G4. The left hand plays a descending eighth-note scale starting on B3. Red circles highlight the notes B \flat , A \flat , and D \flat in the inner voice of the opening theme in bars 1-2. A red arrow points from the first circle to the second, and another from the second to the third, indicating the sequence of notes.

The original version of Motive B: E-D#-D \flat -C#, returns in the middle section in A major (Example 3).

Example 3 Motive B in the middle section of Op. 32, No. 13, b. 21-22.

The image shows a musical score for the middle section of the Prelude in C major, Op. 32, No. 13 by Frédéric Chopin, specifically bars 21-22. The tempo is marked 'Meno mosso' and the dynamics are 'ppp'. The key signature has changed to A major (two sharps). The right hand plays a descending eighth-note scale starting on E4. The left hand plays a descending eighth-note scale starting on E3. Blue circles highlight the notes E, D#, and D \flat in the middle section in A major. A blue arrow points from the first circle to the second, and another from the second to the third, indicating the sequence of notes.

Then the key signature switches back to five flats in bar 27. A version of Motive A in flat minor, G \flat -F-B \flat , begins in the left hand in bar 31 in the dotted rhythm of the opening

theme. This dotted-note version of Motive A, juxtaposed with two-semitone motives in the soprano voice, is repeated and builds up with its variant until bar 37, in which the key signature changes to four sharps and the original pitches of Motive A: A-G#-C# brilliantly return in a *fortissimo*, repeated several times in a falling sequence through the six-octave spans of the piano until bar 42 (Example 4).

Example 4 Motive A in a falling sequence in Op. 32, No. 13, b. 37–42 and Motive B in b. 38 and b. 42.

The image displays a musical score for piano and voice, divided into three systems. The first system is marked 'Vivo' and 'ff'. The piano part features a sequence of chords and notes, with red circles highlighting specific notes and red lines connecting them across staves. The voice part has a melodic line with red circles around notes. The second system includes a 'rit.' marking and a '3 pesante' triplet in the piano part. The third system is marked 'Grave' and 'ff', showing a change in tempo and dynamics. Red circles and lines continue to track specific notes across the systems, illustrating the falling sequence of Motive A.

As Example 4 shows, while the fifth iteration of Motive A appears in octaves in the bass in augmentation as A-G# in bars 40–41, another motive begins in the tenor voice with an altered pitch of A#-G# in bar 41 in the manner of stretto to prepare for the modulation to the major. Then both A-G# in the bass and A#-G# in the tenor fall together on a D-flat, enharmonic

C#, on the downbeat of bar 42, where the opening theme returns triumphantly in the original tonality of D-flat major. The return of the opening theme coincides with the return of Motive B in bar 42, repeated several times and developing to the final climax. Motive A returns in D-flat major as B \flat -A \flat -D \flat in bars 50-52 (Example 5).

Example 5 Motive A in D-flat major at the climax of Op. 32, No. 13, b. 50-51.

The image shows a musical score for Example 5, which is Motive A in D-flat major at the climax of Op. 32, No. 13, bars 50-51. The score is written for piano and consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is D-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 3/4. The score features a piano accompaniment with triplets and a melodic line with chromaticism. Red circles and arrows highlight specific notes in the melodic line, indicating the transformation of Motive A.

All in all, Motive A has been remarkably transformed from the original A-G \sharp -C \sharp of Op. 3 No. 2 to A-G \sharp -D \flat , to A \sharp -G \sharp -D \flat , and finally to B \flat -A \flat -D \flat in this final prelude.

The use of stepwise motion is another unifying aspect shared by many of Rachmaninoff's Preludes; Op. 23, Nos. 1, 3, 4, 6, and 10 and Op. 32, Nos. 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, and 12 include stepwise motion in their opening themes, while Op. 23, Nos. 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8 and Op. 32, Nos. 3, 4, 8, 9, and 12 include it in their thematic materials in the middle section.

In addition to the cyclic use of four descending chromatic notes of Motive B, Rachmaninoff was fond of using chromaticism in his Preludes for both melodic and accompaniment/subordinary materials. Chromatic figures appear as thematic material in Preludes, Op. 23, Nos. 7, 8, and 9 and Op. 32, Nos. 1, 7, and 13. All the other preludes except for Op. 32, Nos. 3 and 9 also include chromaticism.

Some preludes feature a certain intervallic idea, especially two falling notes, instead of linear motion with stepwise or chromatic lines. The Prelude, Op. 23, No. 2 accordingly begins with a falling fourth: B \flat -F in every two-bar phrase of the opening theme. The theme

of Prelude, Op. 23, No. 10 has distinguished falling two-note motives, starting with a falling fifth, D \flat –G \flat , which changes to many different intervals in the prelude and ends with the initial falling fifth. In the set of Preludes, Op. 32, a falling third appears repeatedly in Nos. 3 and 8, while a falling major sixth is the characteristic interval in the opening theme of No. 9. The Prelude, Op. 32, No. 4 also features two notes of a falling third, which increase gradually to the interval of an eighth. The Prelude, Op. 32, No. 7 highlights a three-note group of minor second intervals through the piece such as C–B \sharp –C in the left hand in bar 1 and F–G \flat –F in the right hand in bars 1–2.

Another unique unifying aspect is apparent in the use of a siciliana rhythm () in four Preludes, Op. 32, Nos. 2, 10, 11, and 13. Except for the last one, the siciliana rhythm appears as an important attribute of their thematic material.

The last notable aspect linking the preludes is the conclusion with a series of chords, often slow moving or in a slower tempo. This is observable in Preludes, Op. 3, No. 2, Op. 23, Nos. 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10, and Op. 32, Nos. 1, 3, 9, and 12. The chordal sequence in bars 55–60 of the first Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2, interestingly recurs in bars 56–57 of the last Prelude, Op. 32, No. 13; the chord progression in the former is A–a \sharp 7–A7–F \sharp 7–d \sharp 7, while that in the latter is A–a \sharp 7–d \sharp 7, omitting the third and fourth chords.

Contrasting factors

As they are written in all the different keys, the 24 Preludes offer a wide variety of possibilities for the performer to differentiate tone colors and characters. That may be why many composers have written sets in 24 different keys. Like the cycles of Bach and Chopin, Rachmaninoff alternates major and minor keys within each of the 10 Preludes, Op. 23 and the 13 Preludes, Op. 32. In the set of Op. 23, the alternation of keys appears in minor–major pairs instead of major–minor pairs as in the cycles of Bach and Chopin. The set of Op. 32 has an odd number of 13 pieces; after No. 1 in C major, the set again progresses in the pairs from minor to major, finishing in D-flat major. The two patterns of key order, major–minor and minor–major, seem to contrast each other; however, the psychological direction, meaning,

and feelings may be different. As Tsuchida pointed out, classical music of a large structure in a minor key has a tendency to conclude in a parallel major key.⁶ For example, both Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Brahms's First Symphony are written in c minor, but the key changes to C major in the final movement and the second half of the finale, respectively. Chopin's Third Piano Sonata is in b minor, but both the first and the last movement end in B major. Liszt's Sonata in b minor also ends in B major. Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Sonata in b-flat minor has a finale in B-flat major. The direction from minor to major would give much more fulfilling, satisfying energy and feelings than the opposite combination. In Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes, Op. 23, No. 7 in c minor changes to C major at the end, giving a brilliant, triumphant conclusion. As mentioned earlier, there are five pairs of parallel keys in the 24 Preludes (see Table 1); four out of five parallel-key pairs are in the order of minor to major, opposite to Bach's pairing of major–minor keys. Moreover, Rachmaninoff probably aimed to achieve the effect of the direction from minor to major in the set of Op. 23 as a whole, starting with No. 1 in f-sharp minor and ending with No. 10 in G-flat major, enharmonically the parallel major key of No. 1, and used the same system for the entire cycle of 24 Preludes, starting with Op. 3, No. 2 in c-sharp minor and concluding it with Op. 32, No. 13 in the enharmonically parallel major key of D-flat.

There are two pairs in very distant keys that appear in consecutive preludes and do not share any common tones; those are Op. 23, Nos. 1 & 2 and Op. 32, Nos. 2 & 3. They are totally different in terms of dynamics, texture, articulations, tempo, and character. The former pair of Op. 23 couples a sorrowful, reflective, mostly very quiet piece in f-sharp minor with a highly energetic, flamboyant piece in B-flat major. The latter pair of Op. 32 consists of a lyrical, gloomy siciliana dance in b-flat minor with a brilliant toccata-like piece in E major. They effectively create a bold change. Rachmaninoff must have chosen these contrasting pairs intentionally at the beginning of each set of Op. 23 and Op. 32 to attract the listeners' attention.

⁶ Sadakatsu Tsuchida, "Originality and Directionality on '24 Preludes' of S. V. Rachmaninoff: A Meaning of the Reappearing Main theme," *Research Reports of Shokei Gakuin College*, No. 67 (2014): 29, accessed March 16, 2022. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/290526964.pdf>. (in Japanese)

Another notable contrast can be seen in two pairs of the Preludes, Op. 23: Nos. 3 & 4 and Nos. 5 & 6; the pairs are alike, each featuring contrasting elements. The odd-numbered Op. 23, Nos. 3 and 5 are very rhythmic, motivic, and march-like, with lots of staccato, while the even-numbered Op. 23, Nos. 4 and 6 are smooth, lyrical, and song like, using long legato phrases.

Other contrasting consecutive preludes are Op. 23, Nos. 2 & 3; the former is written in a homophonic texture while the latter has a contrapuntal texture. The Prelude in G major Op. 32, No. 5, which is calm, reflective, and quiet, with a thin texture, is effectively inserted between two dramatic minor-key Preludes, Op. 32, Nos. 4 and 6; the G-major Prelude serves as an interlude in the set of Op. 32.

Lastly, the pair of Preludes Op. 32, Nos. 12 & 13 should be noted. The key change from g-sharp minor to D-flat major is especially bold and striking. The last prelude could have been written in the same sharp key of C-sharp major; however, Rachmaninoff chose the five-flat key of D-flat major, which has a warmer and mellower sound than the seven-sharp key. The keyboard registers used in the last two Preludes are quite different; the Prelude, Op. 32, No. 12 ends quietly, with very high tones in the upper registers, like the sound of sleigh bells, while No. 13 begins with rich, thick chords in the low-middle registers.

Conclusion

The key organization of Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes seems random at first glance, not based on any systematic orders, such as the sets of J. S. Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28. However, they consist perfectly of all the different major and minor keys, organized in alternating major and minor keys. As one of unifying factors, cyclic total relationship is presented between the opening and closing of the 10 Preludes, Op. 23 as well as between the first Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2 and the last Prelude Op. 32, No. 13. The two main thematic ideas introduced in the Prelude Op. 3, No. 2 are remarkably recycled in many of the Op. 23 and Op. 32 Preludes. The 24 Preludes share numerous features, such as the use of common tones/chords, stepwise motion, chromatic lines, intervallic motives, a

certain rhythmic pattern, and a slow chordal conclusion as cyclic elements, while they also vary elements, including bold key changes, irregular inclusion of relative and parallel keys, and many others discussed above. The implementation of unity and contrast with all those details is an essential principle in the form of variation. Therefore, the author agrees with Antipov's assertion that Rachmaninoff's cycle of 24 Preludes is a series of "concealed" variations on the opening Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2. The set of Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes is organized not in a systematic order of keys like J. S. Bach's and Chopin's but in his own unique, original, and meaningful system and conceptual design, which the author believes is highly successful as an integral, cyclic composition.

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