

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PERFORMING RACHMANINOFF'S 24 PRELUDES AS A CYCLE

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Abstract

Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2; 10 Preludes, Op. 23; and 13 Preludes, Op. 32 in all 24 different keys, following the trend of his Russian contemporary composers such as Felix Blumenfeld, Anton Arensky, Alexander Scriabin, César Cui, and Reinhold Glière. Although Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes, Op. 3, No. 2; Op. 23; and Op. 32 were written at three different periods in 1892, 1903 and 1910 respectively, the complete cycle of all 24 Preludes was published in a single volume in 1911. Unlike the systematic order in the sets of Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and Frédéric Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28, the key organization of Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes seems random at first glance; however, they are uniquely integrated by the cyclical manipulation of tonal and rhythmic relationships and thematic ideas. This article reveals the significance of performing the 24 Preludes as a cycle by focusing on the following aspects: key scheme; use of common tones; anticipation of opening material at the end of the preceding prelude; use of the interval of a second; use of chromaticism; use of bell-like tones; cyclical use of two motives of Op. 3, No. 2; organization of tempi in Op. 23; and use of rhythms and compound meters in Op. 32.

Keywords: Rachmaninoff/ 24 Preludes/ Cyclical work/ Music performance

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Introduction

Around the turn of the century from the 19th to 20th, many Russian composers wrote cycles of piano pieces, which are mostly preludes, in all keys. For example, 24 *Préludes*, Op. 17 (1892-94) by Felix Blumenfeld; 24 *Morceaux caractéristiques*, Op. 36 (1894) by Anton Arensky; 24 *Préludes*, Op. 11 (1888-96) by Alexander Scriabin, 25 *Préludes*, Op. 64 (1903) by César Cui; and 25 *Preludes*, Op. 30 (1907) by Reinhold Glière. Sergei Rachmaninoff, who was a composition student of Arensky and a classmate of Scriabin at the Moscow Conservatory, was most likely influenced by those compositions in his decision to write his cycle of the 24 *Preludes* in all keys.

Most of the previous cycles of 24 or 25 preludes were based on the same key scheme as either J. S. Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* or Chopin's *Preludes*, Op. 28. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in Book I (1722) and Book II (1742), including 24 sets of preludes and fugues in each book, is written in the order of alternating parallel major and minor keys, starting with C major and C minor and moving up a semitone chromatically. Chopin's 24 *Preludes*, Op. 28 (1835-39) also start in C major and then, pairing with its relative key of A minor, and moves up by following the circle of fifths.

Rachmaninoff wrote his 24 *Preludes* in three separate opus numbers over a period of 18 years. The *Prelude*, Op. 3, No. 2 was composed in 1892 shortly after he graduated from the Moscow Conservatory. According to Max Harrison, a biographer of Rachmaninoff, it is unlikely that he had any thought at that time of writing a complete set covering all the keys.¹ The 10 *Preludes*, Op. 23, emerged about 10 years later, No. 5 in 1901, and the rest in 1902-1903, when Rachmaninoff had already attained international fame as both a pianist and a composer; this was also the period of his marriage to Natalia Satina in April 1902 and the birth of their first daughter in May 1903.² 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*, Op. 32 were written in rapid succession between August 23 and September 10, 1910.⁴ The

¹ Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 112.

² Angela Glover, "An Annotated Catalogue of the Major Piano Works of Sergei Rachmaninoff" (DM treatise, Florida State University, 2003), 16.

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

⁴ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 413-414.

complete cycle of the 24 Preludes in all keys was published in a single volume in 1911 including the Prelude Op. 3, No. 2 as the first piece; Op. 23, No. 1 as the second; Op. 23, No. 10 as the eleventh; Op. 32, No. 1 as the twelfth; Op. 32, No. 13 as the twenty-fourth. They were written in all keys but not based on a systematic order based on a specific key scheme such as J. S. Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and Chopin's 24 Preludes, Op. 28.

Although many scholars mention Rachmaninoff originally did not intend to write a complete cycle, 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."⁵ 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.⁶ Jonathan Young discusses Antipov's claim by focusing on the Preludes, Op. 32 in his dissertation,⁷ while Sadakatsu Tsuchida investigates the thematic ideas in the 24 Preludes from the perspective of the composer's religion.⁸

Although it is not certain whether Rachmaninoff initially intended to write a cycle of 24 preludes, the trend among contemporary composers of writing such sets of pieces in all 24 keys and the fact that Rachmaninoff published his 24 Preludes in one volume suggest that he may have conceived of these works cyclically. None of the scholars cited above have provided an in-depth analysis in terms of connections among the 24 Preludes. This article will reveal the significance of performing all 24 Preludes as a cyclical work by discussing the following nine aspects which uniquely integrate the 24 Preludes:

1. Key scheme
2. Use of common tones
3. Anticipation of opening material at the end of the preceding prelude
4. Use of the interval of a second
5. Use of chromaticism
6. Use of bell-like tones
7. Cyclical use of two motives of Op. 3, No. 2

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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), X.

⁷ Jonathan Young, "Rachmaninoff's 'Concealed Variation' Principle: Inspiration for Motivic Unity in his Preludes, Op. 32" (DM diss., University of Kansas, 2019), iii.

⁸ Sadakatsu Tsuchida, "Originality and Directionality on '24 Preludes' of S. V. Rachmaninoff: A Meaning of The Reappearing Main theme," *Research Reports of Shoikei Gakuin College*, No. 67 (2014): 38.

8. Organization of tempi in Op. 23

9. Use of particular rhythms and compound meters in Op. 32

1. Key Scheme

Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes do not begin in C major and are not based on a systematic order such as Bach's or Chopin's. The table below (Table 1) shows the key of each prelude, key relationship to the previous prelude, opening tempo, and opening time signature.

Table 1 Key, key relationship to the previous prelude, and opening tempo of Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes, Op. 3, No 2; Op. 23; and Op. 32.

Source: by author

No.	Opus number	Key		Key relationship to the previous prelude	Opening tempo	Opening time signature
		minor	major			
1	Op. 3, No. 2	c-sharp			Lento	Common (4/4)
2	Op. 23, No. 1	f-sharp		Subdominant	Largo	Common
3	Op. 23, No. 2		B-flat	(Remote)	Maestoso	Common
4	Op. 23, No. 3	d		Mediant	Tempo di minuetto	3/4
5	Op. 23, No. 4		D	Parallel major	Andante cantabile	3/4
6	Op. 23, No. 5	g			Alla marcia	Common
7	Op. 23, No. 6		E-flat	Submediant	Andante	Common
8	Op. 23, No. 7	c (- C)		Relative minor	Allegro	Common
9	Op. 23, No. 8		A-flat	Submediant	Allegro vivace	3/2
10	Op. 23, No. 9	e-flat			Presto	Common
11	Op. 23, No. 10		G-flat	Relative major	Largo	3/4
12	Op. 32, No. 1		C	(Remote)	Allegro vivace	Alla breve (2/2)
13	Op. 32, No. 2	b-flat		(Remote)	Allegretto	9/8
14	Op. 32, No. 3		E	(Remote)	Allegro vivace	Common
15	Op. 32, No. 4	e		Parallel minor	Allegro con brio	Common
16	Op. 32, No. 5		G	Relative major	Moderato	Common

No.	Opus number	Key		Key relationship to the previous prelude	Opening tempo	Opening time signature
		minor	major			
17	Op. 32, No. 6	f		(Remote)	Allegro appassionato	2/4
18	Op. 32, No. 7		F	Parallel major	Moderato	Alla breve
19	Op. 32, No. 8	a		Mediant	Vivo	6/4
20	Op. 32, No. 9		A	Parallel major	Allegro moderato	9/8
21	Op. 32, No. 10	b		Supertonic	Lento	Common
22	Op. 32, No. 11		B	Parallel major	Allegretto	3/8
23	Op. 32, No. 12	g-sharp		Relative minor	Allegro	12/8
24	Op. 32, No. 13		D-flat	(Remote)	Grave	Common

As seen in Table 1, 10 Preludes, Op. 23 starts with No. 1 in f-sharp minor, followed by No. 2 in B-flat major. The following preludes continue alternating between minor and major keys. As for 13 Preludes, Op. 32, No. 1 is in C major, followed by No. 2 in b-flat minor; this set alternates between major and minor keys until No. 12, concluding with No. 13 in D-flat major. This alternation of major/minor key scheme presents a contrast with one another, seemingly intentional and rather systematic as a whole.

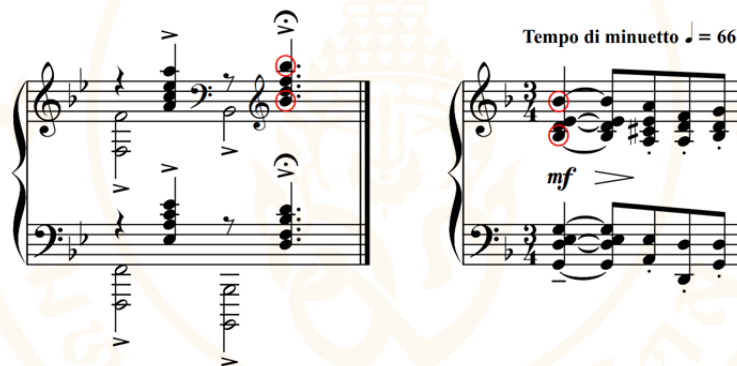
Moreover, the whole cycle includes four pairs of relative keys (Op. 23, Nos. 6 & 7, Nos. 9 & 10; Op. 32, Nos. 4 & 5, Nos. 11 & 12) and five pairs of parallel keys (Op. 23, Nos. 3 & 4; Op. 32, Nos. 3 & 4, 6 & 7, 8 & 9, 10 & 11). The connection between the pairs of relative or parallel keys is strong because they are closely related through two common tones (e.g., D-F-A and D-F[#]-A in parallel keys of d minor and D major, E^b-G-B^b and C-E^b-G in relative keys of E-flat major and c minor). These pairs, especially the three consecutive pairs of parallel keys in Op. 32 Nos. 6-11, suggest a deliberate sequential arrangement. Besides sharing the same tonic in the pair of parallel keys, the direction from minor to major offers a greater sense of fulfilling, satisfying energy and feelings than the opposite combination. The parallel-key minor-to-major sequence could be seen in the set of Op. 23 as a whole, starting with No. 1 in f-sharp minor and concluding with No. 10 in G-flat major, enharmonically the parallel major key of No. 1. This is also seen in the entire cycle of the 24 Preludes, starting with Op. 3, No. 2 in c-sharp minor and concluding with Op. 32, No. 13 in the enharmonically parallel major key of D-flat.

If the cycle of the 24 Preludes is played without an intermission, there is a sequence of two major keys from the Prelude Op. 23 No. 10 to the Prelude Op. 32 No. 1. Even though

both are written in a major key, they are highly contrasting in tonality (G-flat vs C), tempo (Largo vs Allegro vivace), melodic structure (use of short motives vs long lines), and character (lyrical vs vigorous). Although we are not certain if Rachmaninoff conceived of a break between Op. 23 and Op. 32 when he published them as a cycle, the break could help in making the first Prelude of Op. 32 as a fresh start, especially with the choice of the key in C major, regarding the prelude as a prologue to the second half of the program. In fact, the Prelude Op. 32 No. 1 is the shortest one among the 24 Preludes, reminding us of the c-major *Preludio*, the first piece of 12 *Transcendental Etudes* by Franz Liszt.

2. Use of Common Tones

Besides those pairs of relative and parallel keys, several other preludes are linked by common tones. Example 1 shows the final tonic chord of Op. 23, No. 2 in B-flat major transitioning to the first chord of Op. 23, No. 3, which is an E half-diminished chord (ii \flat 7 of d minor), with a B-flat on the top note.



Example 1 Op. 23, No. 2, m. 61 and Op. 23, No. 3, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Example 2 is the last measure of Op. 23, No. 5 in g minor, linking the tonic G to the opening theme of Op. 23, No. 6 in E-flat major.



Example 2 Op. 23, No. 5, m. 86 and Op. 23, No. 6, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

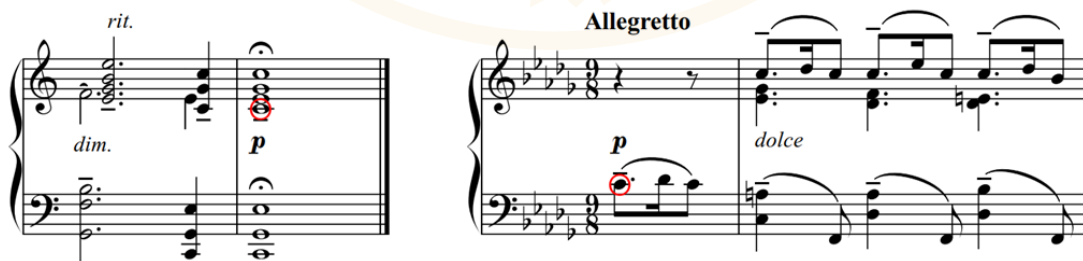
The next example is Op. 23, No. 7 in c minor and No. 8 in D-flat major. No. 7 ends on a Picardy Third, C-major chord, introducing the opening theme of No. 8 starting on middle C (Example 3).



Example 3 Op. 23, No. 7, m. 91 and Op. 23, No. 8, opening.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Example 4 is the first two Preludes of Op. 32 in distant keys of C major and b-flat minor. They are smoothly linked by a melodic element on middle C.

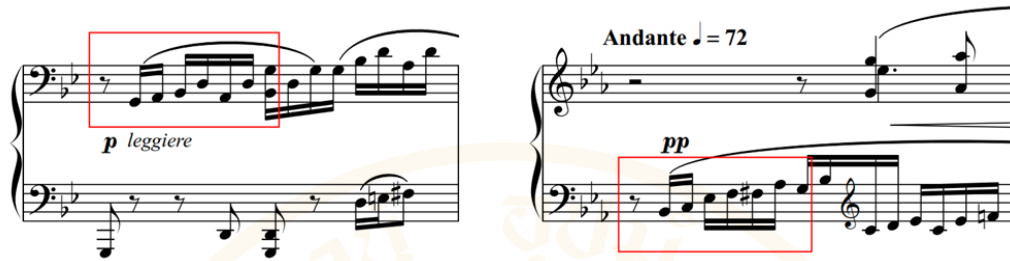


Example 4 Op. 32, No. 1, mm. 40-41 and Op. 32, No. 2, opening.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

3. Anticipation of Opening Material at the End of the Preceding Prelude

This relates to the use of common tones, yet not in single pitches but common rhythmic patterns, chords and motives. Example 5 illustrates how cleverly the opening line of the left hand in Op. 23, No. 6 was anticipated in the concluding line of Op. 23, No. 5.

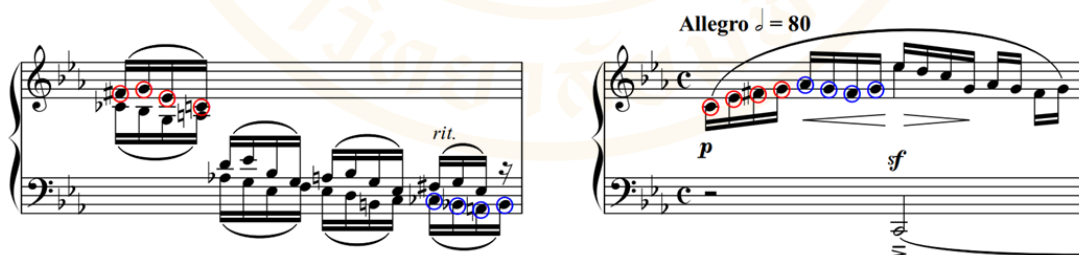


Example 5 Op. 23, No. 5, m. 84 and Op. 23, No. 6, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Both preludes are written in the time signature of 4/4 and the measures begin with the rhythm of γ $\text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩}$ ♩ in an ascending motion moving to the seventh sixteenth note on a G.

The next example is Op. 23, No. 6 and No. 7, which also share the similar pattern of pitches in 4/4. In Prelude No. 7 the first two beats begin with sixteenth-note rhythms; the pattern C-E \flat -F \sharp -G on beat 1 is anticipated in the first beat of the next to the last measure of No. 6 as F \sharp -G-E \flat -C, and A \flat -G-F \sharp -G on beat 2 of No. 7 is anticipated in the last beat of the same measure of No. 6 as C \flat -B \flat -A-B \flat , as the exact transposition from the key of E-flat to C minor (Example 6).



Example 6 Op. 23, No. 6, m. 42 and Op. 23, No. 7, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

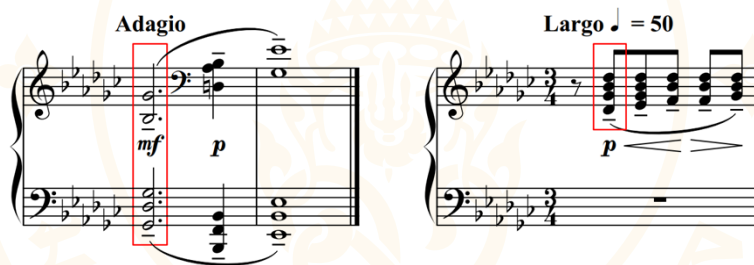
Prelude Op. 23, No. 8 in D-flat major begins the anacrusis with an unexpected f-sharp diminished harmony. This is actually anticipated in the coda of the previous prelude as an f-sharp diminished seventh chord marked *ff sempre marcato* (Example 7).



Example 7 Op. 23, No. 7, mm. 87-88 and Op. 23 No. 8, opening.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

The last section of the Prelude in e-flat minor, Op. 23, No. 9, is mostly quiet, prolonging an e-flat pedal point in measures 40-49. The sudden appearance of a G-flat major chord marked *mf* in measure 50 with a change in the tempo from original *Presto* to *Adagio* smoothly anticipates G-flat major tonality in calm *Largo* tempo of the following Prelude No. 10 (Example 8).



Example 8 Op. 23, No. 9, mm. 50-51 and Op. 23, No. 10, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

The coda of Op. 32, No. 1 features chromatically descending chords in measures 37-41 including a D major ninth chord, a D-flat major seventh chord and a C major chord with the top voice: F[#]-F-E. This was in anticipation of the inner voice in the first measure of Op. 32, No. 2 as G^b (enharmonic of F[#])-F-E with modified harmonies (Example 9).



Example 9 Op. 32, No. 1, mm. 38-40 and Op. 32, No. 2, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

All these above subtle anticipations make the connection from one prelude to the next smoothly and unconsciously prepare for the next prelude.

4. Use of the Interval of a Second

The 24 Preludes reveal Rachmaninoff's tendency to use the interval of a second, which frequently occurs in the opening theme in either a minor second or major second in ascending, descending motion, or combined motions. For example, the descending three notes: F \sharp -E-D in the opening melody in measures 2-3 of Op. 23, No. 1 correspond to the ascending three notes: F \sharp -G \sharp -A in the bass of measure 1 as an inverted augmentation (Example 10).



Example 10 Op. 23, No. 1, mm. 1-3.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

The melodic interval with two notes, D and E, is seen at the beginning of Op. 32, No. 4 and No. 5; the ostinato pattern of D-E-D-E in the left hand in measures 1-6 of Op. 32, No. 5 is seen as a retrograde augmentation of E-D-E-D in the top voice of triplet chords in measure 2 of Op. 32, No. 4 (Example 11).



Example 11 Op. 32, No. 4, m. 2 and Op. 32, No. 5, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

The E-D-E-D pattern of Op. 32, No. 4 actually first appears in the opening theme of Op. 23, No. 9 as E \flat -D-E \flat -D in the right-hand sixteenth notes. There are two other preludes using the D-E-D-E pattern of Op. 32, No. 5 in the opening theme, which seem unlikely to be a coincidence: F-G-F-G in the opening of Op. 32, No. 6 and E-F \sharp -E-F \sharp in Op. 32, No. 10 (Example 12).



Example 12 Op. 23, No. 9, m. 1; Op. 32, No. 6, m. 1; and Op. 32, No. 10, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

The use of the interval of a second is happens in all preludes except for the following: Op. 23, Nos. 2, 5 and 7 and Op. 32, Nos. 3 and 13. As for these five preludes, Rachmaninoff uniquely applies extensive stepwise motions in the middle section to give a contrast to the opening theme, which is not comprised of the interval of a second. Simplified excerpts of those are in Examples 13-16.



Example 13 Op. 23, No. 2, mm. 19-23, melody in the tenor.

Source: G. Henle Verlag



Example 14 Op. 23, No. 5, mm. 35-36, melody in the soprano.

Source: G. Henle Verlag



Example 15 Op. 23, No. 7, mm. 19-23, melody in the bass.

Source: G. Henle Verlag



Example 16 Op. 32, No. 3, mm. 31-34, melodies in the soprano and bass.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

The middle section of the Prelude, Op. 32, No. 13 includes a melody in a long chromatic line, which will be discussed below.

5. Use of Chromaticism

Chromaticism, which is one kind of interval of a second in semitones, is one of the most prominent characteristics of Rachmaninoff's music. The first Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2 includes abundant chromatic gestures including the motive of four descending chromatic notes: E-D[♯]-D-C[♯] in the middle section.

The preludes containing consistent sixteenth-note figurations such as Op. 23, Nos. 2, 6, 7 and 9 weave chromaticism as melodic material or combine chromaticism with diatonic melodies. The opening three measures of Op. 23, No. 7 highlight C-B-B[♭] on each downbeat as a harmonic and melodic outline while the following Op. 23, No. 8 begins with three ascending quarter notes in the anacrusis: C-D[♭]-D; these chromatic gestures seem to connect the two preludes well.

The texture of the Op. 32 set is thicker and more polyphonic than Op. 3, No. 2 and Op. 23 with dissonances and complicated rhythms. Chromaticism appears in almost every prelude of Op. 32.

6. Use of Bell-Like Tones

Use of bell-like tones is another important characteristic of Rachmaninoff's music. Born in Novgorod, Rachmaninoff grew up with the sound of bells.⁹ He remarked "The sound of church bells dominated all the cities of Russia I used to know—Novgorod, Kiev, Moscow. They accompanied every Russian from childhood to the grave, and no composer could escape their influence".¹⁰

The Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2, nicknamed "The Bells of Moscow", begins with three bell-like tones resounding in a low register. The piece is written full of sonorous bell-like chords. Pianistically, bell-like tones are produced by upward arm motion. The next two excerpts are good examples: offbeat high tones in the third-variation section of Op. 23, No. 4 in measures 53-73 (Example 17) and high melodic tones in the coda of Op. 23, No. 10 in measures 48-56 (Example 18). The polyphonic texture of both preludes requires the soprano voice to be played as lyrical ringing bell-like tones with upward arm motion.

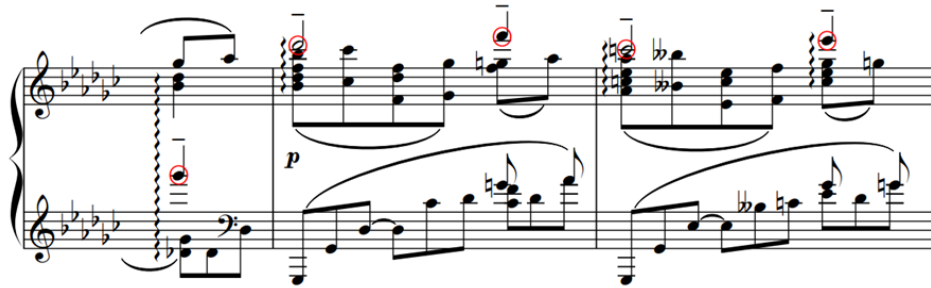


Example 17 Op. 23, No. 4, mm. 53-54.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

⁹ Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninoff* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

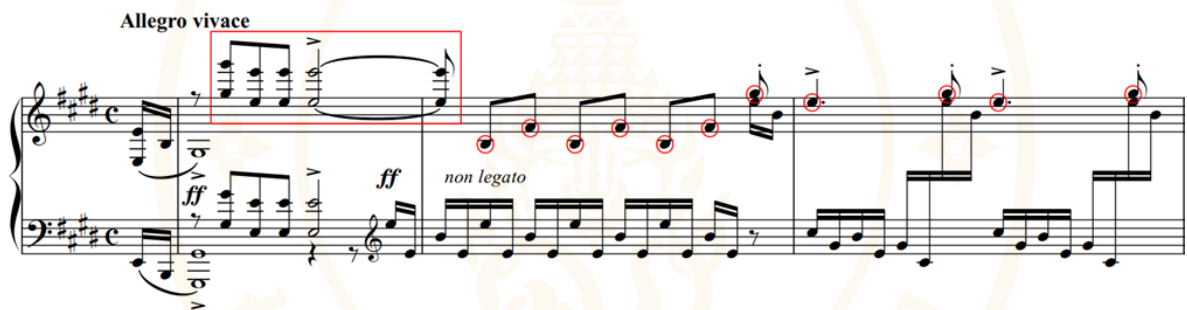
¹⁰ Veleria Z. Nollan, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: Cross Rhythms of the Soul* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022), 199.



Example 18 Op. 23, No. 10, mm. 48-50.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Among 13 Preludes, Op. 32, the following three offer bell-like tone effects. Op. 32, No. 3 is a brilliant toccata and seems to anticipate his choral symphony “The Bells”, Op. 35 (1913) with exuberant rhythms and ceremonial clamoring bell-like tones (Example 19).



Example 19 Op. 32, No. 3, mm. 1-3.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Op. 32, No. 10, the opposite of No. 3 in a dark, somber character, includes low tones resembling great iron bells (Example 20).



Example 20 Op. 32, No. 10, m. 1 and m. 18.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Op. 32, No. 12 is winter-like, including tones of sleigh bells (Example 21).

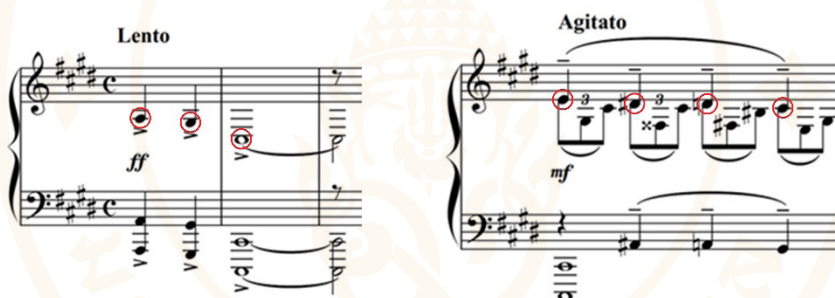


Example 21 Op. 32, No. 12, mm. 45-46.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

7. Cyclical Use of Two Motives of Op. 3, No. 2

Another significant element linking the 24 Preludes is the use of cyclical motives, which are thematic constituents of the Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2, that is, the opening three-note motive: A-G \sharp -C \sharp and four descending chromatic notes as the thematic motive of the middle section: E-D \sharp -D-C \sharp (Example 22).



Example 22 Motive: A-G \sharp -C \sharp in m. 1 and Motive: E-D \sharp -D-C \sharp in m. 14 of Op. 3, No. 2.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

These two motives are frequently recycled in Op. 23 and Op. 32. The table below shows the measure numbers of preludes that include the two motives in the original and transposed pitches (Table 2). The motive: A-G \sharp -C \sharp sometimes appears with modified pitches and motive E-D \sharp -D-C \sharp appears in an inverted ascending motion; those are not included in the table.

**Table 2 Motive: A-G \sharp -C \sharp and Motive: E-D \sharp -D-C \sharp recurring in various preludes
in Op. 23 and Op. 32**

Source: by author

Opus number	Motive: A-G \sharp -C \sharp	Motive: E-D \sharp -D-C \sharp
Op. 23, No. 3	m. 1, m. 17, mm. 75-76	m. 63, m. 64
Op. 23, No. 4	mm. 75-77	
Op. 23, No. 5	mm. 61-63	mm. 29-30, mm. 48-49
Op. 23, No. 6		m. 31, m. 32
Op. 23, No. 8	mm. 4-5, mm. 13-14, mm. 46-47	
Op. 32, No. 1	mm. 1-2, mm. 3-4, mm. 14-15, mm. 26-27	mm. 37-40
Op. 32, No. 2	m. 1, etc., mm. 19-20, m. 46, m. 47, etc.	m. 26
Op. 32, No. 3		m. 53, m. 54
Op. 32, No. 5	mm. 9-10, mm. 34-35, etc.	
Op. 32, No. 6	mm. 3, 4, 7, 9, etc. mm. 22-23, m. 32-41, etc.	mm. 16-20, mm. 48-52
Op. 32, No. 7		mm. 12-13
Op. 32, No. 10		mm. 3-4, mm. 57-58
Op. 32, No. 11		mm. 73-74
Op. 32, No. 13	mm. 1-2, mm. 2-3, mm. 18-19, mm. 19-20, mm. 31-33, mm. 37-42, mm. 50-52, mm. 59-60	mm. 21-25, mm. 42-48, mm. 56-57

Among those, four preludes use the motive of A-G \sharp -C \sharp in the opening theme: Op. 23, No. 3, Op. 32, Nos. 1, 2 and 13. Op. 23, No. 3 includes B \flat -A-D in the opening three chords as the transposed version of the motive of A-G \sharp -C \sharp in D minor (see Example 1 in page 6). The usage of the motive of A-G \sharp -C \sharp in the opening themes of Op. 32, No. 1 and No. 2 is discussed in Jonathan Young's dissertation.¹¹

As seen in the table, Op. 32, No. 13 includes the cyclical use of the two motives most substantially. The original motive: A-G \sharp -C \sharp of Op. 3, No. 2 appears as B \flat -A \flat -D \flat in the inner voice as a secondary melodic line of the opening theme in D-flat major in measures 1-2 of Op. 32, No. 13 (Example 23) while the original middle-section motive: E-D \sharp -D-C \sharp of Op. 3, No. 2 recurs with the same pitches in a long melodic line in the A-major middle section of Op. 32, No. 13 (Example 24).

¹¹ Jonathan Young, "Rachmaninoff's 'Concealed Variation' Principle: Inspiration for Motivic Unity in his Preludes, Op. 32" (DM diss., University of Kansas, 2019), 18, 20.



Example 23 Op. 32 No. 13, mm. 1-2.

Source: G. Henle Verlag



Example 24 Op. 32, No. 13, mm. 21-23, melody in the treble clef.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

8. Organization of Tempi in Op. 23

As seen in Table 1, the set of Op. 23 begins with No. 1 in f-sharp minor and ends with No. 10 in G-flat major, which is the enharmonic parallel key of No. 1. Both preludes are written in the same slow tempo of *Largo*. In Nos. 3-6, a prelude of dancing or marching tempo is paired with a slow lyrical one: No. 3 in *Tempo di minuetto* with No. 4 in *Andante cantabile*, and No. 5 in *Alla marcia* with No. 6 in *Andante*. Then from No. 6 to No. 9, the four consecutive preludes feature sixteenth-note figurations in perpetual motion and the tempo gradually increases; No. 6 in *Andante* $\text{♩} = 72$, No. 7 in *Allegro* $\text{♩} = 80$, No. 8 in *Allegro vivace* $\text{♩} = 108$, and No. 9 in *Presto* $\text{♩} = 152$. This provides increasing energy and excitement towards the end of the set. As a whole, the set, which begins slowly, presents contrasts in two pairs in the first half of the set; then creates a sort of crescendo to the last prelude, which serves as a calm, slow postlude of the entire set.

9. Use of Particular Rhythms and Compound Meters in Op. 32

The set of Op. 32 demonstrates more complex rhythms in a denser polyphonic texture than the earlier preludes of Op. 3, No. 2 and Op. 23. Polyrrhythms are used in Op. 32, Nos. 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 13. Among them, sixteenth-note quintuplets appear as accompaniment in Nos. 5, 7 and 9; quintuplets in No. 5 are played almost incessantly serving as a characteristic

rhythmic ostinato while quintuplets in No. 7 appear in the middle voice in the coda and those in No. 9, in the bass of the middle section (Example 25).



Example 25 Op. 32, No. 5, m. 1; Op. 32, No. 7, mm. 33-34; and Op. 32, No. 9, m. 15.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Another important thing to note is a siciliano rhythm of $\text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩}$. This swinging rhythm is first seen in Op. 32, No. 2 as a rhythmic motto appearing perpetually. The siciliano rhythm appears again in Op. 32, No. 10 in the opening motive of the anacrusis in the same manner as No. 2 in a slower tempo (Example 26).



Example 26 Op. 32, No. 2, m. 1 and Op. 32, No. 10, m. 1.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

Two other Preludes Op. 32, Nos. 11 and 13 also utilize siciliano rhythms; No. 11 begins with them in the chordal opening theme while No. 11 includes them in the transition in measures 11-17 marked *accel. - - - - a tempo più mosso* as if recalling the swinging rhythms of Op. 32, No. 2 and No. 11 (Example 27).



Example 27 Op. 32, No. 11, mm. 1-2 and Op. 32, No. 13, mm. 11-12.

Source: G. Henle Verlag

As for the time signature, among eleven preludes of Op. 3 No. 2 and Op. 23, seven of them are written in common time; none of the others are written in compound meter such as 3/8, 6/8, 9/8 or 12/8. On the contrary, five out of 13 Preludes, Op. 32 start the piece in compound meters; No. 2 in 9/8, No. 8 in 6/4, No. 9 in 9/8, No. 11 in 3/8, and No. 12 in 12/8. Prelude, Op. 32, No. 4 starts in common time (4/4) but frequently changes meter and tempo; from measure 27, it becomes a compound meter including 6/8 and 12/8 but mostly remaining in 9/8. Three other preludes of Op. 32 sound like compound meter even though they are not written thus; No. 6 is written in 2/4 meter with abundant sixteenth-note triplets and sextuplets so that it sounds like 12/16 meter, while Nos. 10 and 13 are written in common time but sound like 12/8 due to the presence of many eighth-note triplets, sixteenth-note sextuplets, and siciliano rhythms (♩.♩). Actually, starting in No. 9, locking rhythms of ♩♩ (or ♩.♩) and siciliano rhythms unite the proceeding preludes until No. 13. All four Preludes Op. 32, Nos. 9-12 begin softly (*p*) and end in *pianissimo*; there is neither a brilliant ending nor increasing tempi as in the second half of Op. 23; however, the sequence of those four preludes of Op. 32, creates a certain growing internal intensity creating an underlying atmosphere with locking and siciliano rhythms, which would not be felt unless these are performed in sequence. The last Prelude, Op. 32, No. 13 contains all kinds of rhythms, repeated use of previous motives, and deep, surging emotions to build up to a magnificent climax, serving as a brilliant conclusion not only for the set but for the complete cycle of the 24 Preludes.

Conclusion

Rachmaninoff's Preludes, Op. 3, No. 2; Op. 23; and Op. 32 are written in three different periods. When he wrote the first Prelude in c-sharp minor as the second piece of *Morceaux de fantaisie*, Op. 3, he may not have intended to make it as part of 24 preludes in all keys. However, there was a trend among his contemporary composers including his composition teacher Arensky and his classmate Scriabin to write a set of pieces in all 24 keys. Moreover, at the same time while Rachmaninoff was working on 10 Preludes, Op. 23, he was also writing his *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, Op. 22 based on Chopin's Prelude in c minor, Op. 28, No. 20. It is assumed that Rachmaninoff may have been influenced by Chopin's set of 24 Preludes in all keys in writing his Op. 23. The set of 13 Preludes, Op. 32 was written rapidly within nineteen days. The completion date of each prelude was recorded by the composer. Instead of placing 13 Preludes in the order of completion dates, Rachmaninoff changed the order of preludes when publishing them as a set. This indicates that there were reasons for him to arrange them in a specific order, which would not be important

or noticeable if these were not played as a complete set. Therefore, the author believes that Rachmaninoff conceived of having the set of Op. 32 together with Op. 3, No. 2 and Op. 23 as one meaningful musical cycle of composition even though each prelude is perfectly artistic and complete as a singular work. Regarding the nine aspects discussed above, the sequence of all 24 Preludes has certain effects and significance, which can be revealed and valued only if these are played through as a cycle. Performing a complete set of one opus number, either Op. 23 or Op. 32 is already a wonderful program, however, the entire key scheme of the inclusion of all 24 keys and the innovative order of the keys as well as the cyclical use of two motives of Op. 3, No. 2 in many of Op. 23 and Op. 32 with the particularly strong connection between Op. 3, No. 2 and Op. 32, No. 13 would not be enjoyed unless all the 24 Preludes are played as a whole. The author hopes that Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes will be appreciated as a cyclical work by pianists and the audience.

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