

Embracing imperfection in Benno Moiseiwitsch's prelude to Chopin

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ABSTRACT In this paper I examine the recorded performance of Chopin's E minor Prelude Op. 28, No. 4 by Benno Moiseiwitsch from 1949. Building upon the interpretive approaches of John Rink, Joel Lester, and Pablo Casals, I discuss two idiosyncratic passages in Moiseiwitsch's rendition, moments that have often drawn criticism, in order to reveal what new questions his performance raises. First I discuss how a peculiarly rolled chord in bar 7 opens up a more complicated understanding of musical time as it relates to harmonic *inactivity*. Second, I argue that an overt mistake, an added note in bar 21, serves to illuminate a striking feature of Chopin's voice leading that has larger implications for our comprehension of the Prelude's formal use of texture. My goal is to show how the study of recorded performances can provide rich and meaningful analytic insight. In particular, I suggest that even with imperfect or unorthodox interpretations that appear to go against the wisdom of conventional analyses and analytic methods, the resulting disturbances may reveal even richer, deeper, and more meaningful musical phenomena.

KEY WORDS: Performance, analysis, John Rink

"Those see nothing but faults that seek for nothing else."
Thomas Fuller, *Gnomologia*, 1732

Writing about the first time he performed for Pablo Casals, the cellist Gregor Piatigorsky described how devastated he was by the poor quality of his own playing. He was even more confused, however, by Casals' enthusiastic response, and he confessed to Casals his bewilderment:

He [Casals] reacted with sudden anger. He rushed to the cello. "Listen!" He played a phrase from the Beethoven sonata. "Didn't you play this fingering? Ah, you did! It was novel to me...it was good...and here, didn't you attack that passage with an up-bow, like this?" He demonstrated. He went through Schumann and Beethoven always emphasizing all he liked that he had done. "And for the rest," he said passionately,

“leave it to the ignorant and stupid who judge by counting only the faults. I can be grateful, and so must you be, for even one note, one wonderful phrase.” (Piatigorsky, 1965, pp. 128-129)

Casals' forgiving reaction projects an idealistic indifference to the pressures and expectations of perfection that performers have increasingly come to feel over the last century. Yet for all its apparent innocence, his response demonstrates an exemplary way to view interpretive imperfections. Without succumbing to the anarchic notion that “anything goes”, Casals revels in the musical possibilities, the details, the individual glimmers, and the “wonderful phrases” that reflect on the possibilities of an ideal performance. His delight in Piatigorsky's imperfect performance, however, is more than a trifling anecdote. Rather it also allows us to reconsider the nature of musical analysis as well as to provide us with a helpful model for approaching the relationship between analysis and performance.

Let us apply Casals' openness to a different imperfect performance: Chopin's E minor Prelude Op. 28 as recorded by Benno Moiseiwitsch in 1948, an interpretation that according to some fails both to capture important structural and expressive details and to arouse the enthusiasm of critics and scholars (see Rink, 2001). Rather than dismiss the performance for its faults, I will demonstrate the novelties this interpretation reveals, the striking moments that show us something about both the subtle and sublime qualities in the composition and its rendition. This approach serves not to defend idiosyncratic and controversial interpretations. Instead I argue that as performers, analysts, and critics, we can learn much from an unexpected turn of phrase and even from the occasional error.

Reflections on a Prelude

Of all the Chopin Preludes, the E minor Prelude has perhaps elicited the most critical, analytical, and popular attention (see Figure 1; click [here](#) to listen). It has been traced through Fred Lerdahl's tonal pitch space; it has been used by Eric Clarke and Jane Davidson to explore the musical body, by Kofi Agawu to understand musical closure, by Eric Clarke to display how empirical research can reveal multiple interpretations, by John Rink to express the performance of musical shape, and by Carl Schachter to demonstrate the composer's compositional process (Agawu, 1998; Clarke & Davidson, 1998; Clarke, 1995, 2004; Lerdahl, 2001; Rink, 2004; Schachter, 1994). It has been played by all the great pianists and yet it is this Prelude that Bobby (Jack Nicholson) plays in the film *Five Easy Pieces*, laughing that it is the easiest piece he could have picked.

Its technical simplicity notwithstanding, the E minor Prelude presents us with myriad analytical and interpretive ambiguities. While scores of analysts have revelled in the music's complexity, so too have different performances illuminated the multiple and varying textural and melodic possibilities within the score. Each rendition allows the music to be seen in a different light. Some pianists portray the Prelude as a melodic lament, the vocal line struggling to soar above the underlying bass voices (e.g., Jorge Bolet & Lili Kraus). Others explore the left-hand's intricate inner world, its conversation between three lines that descend at their own pace before coalescing at the concluding harmonies (e.g., Cyprien Katsaris & Jeanne-Marie Darré). For still others, the bass line receives the most prominence, its weight pulling the harmony and the melody down with it (e.g., Shura Cherkassky, Alfred Cortot, & Guiomar Novaes).¹

¹ The discographic information for these performances is listed below. For a more developed assessment of different types of performances, see Rink, 2001.

Figure 1. Chopin Prelude Op. 28, No. 4²

As John Rink has demonstrated in his review of fourteen different recordings of the Prelude, performances can both reflect and transcend conventional analysis (Rink, 2001). When evaluating Martha Argerich’s performance, for instance, Rink recalls Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger’s description of the Prelude’s lamenting *Affekt* (Rink, 2001, p. 439). One can observe how the pianist leaves an extraordinary amount of time between the penultimate

² This transcription of the Chopin Prelude comes from the French first edition, second revised impression (Paris: Adolph Catelin, 1839). The original can be viewed through the Online Chopin Variorum Edition: <http://www.ocve.org.uk/>. Alternatively, see Rink (2001, p. 434).

cadence and the final three chords: "Argerich conveys a sense of finality – of death after life – poignantly capturing the affect of lamentation referred to earlier" (Rink, 2001, p. 442).

Similarly, Rink notes how the pianist Shura Cherkassky downplays the potential climax in bar 17. This is an unusual decision given the traditions of interpretation, to say nothing of the dynamic arrival indicated in the score, the doubled B in the left hand that leaps up an octave to a fully textured diminished sonority, and the dramatically disjunct melodic line in the right hand. As Rink points out, however, Cherkassky's interpretive decision corresponds to the argument made by Carl Schachter, who emphasises the more important arrival of the "structural dominant" in bar 19 (Schachter, 1994, cited in Rink, 2001, p. 441).

Yet a performance need not relate to the analytic tenets of analysts for it to be compelling. Rink is fascinated by Cherkassky's seemingly capricious treatment of tempo, the way he impulsively accelerates and decelerates. A further consideration of the performance reveals for Rink an underlying "rubato motive" that subtly unifies the Prelude (Rink, 2001, p. 441). Although Cherkassky does not necessarily articulate anything about the Prelude's inherent structure that one might not already hear, the pianist's fresh interpretation allows us to re-conceptualise the work.³ The rendition initially challenges the conventions of performance, but in the end it still satisfies the criteria that Rink deems necessary for it to be musical, logical, and compelling.

In my subsequent elaboration of Moiseiwitsch's interpretation, I build on Rink's approach to Cherkassky's rendition but also go beyond it. Without presuming an entirely "successful" performance, I suggest what a performance might show us about the Prelude of which many had not been previously aware. Rink's own analysis of Moiseiwitsch's performance serves as a perfect entrée into this discussion. Unlike Cherkassky, Moiseiwitsch fails, for Rink, to convey "the qualities of coherence and cogency" (Rink, 2001, p. 442). His interpretation is "logically flawed" (Rink, 2001, p. 442). Although Rink highlights the expressive qualities of Moiseiwitsch's performance, he disapproves of how "mechanical" the pianist's left hand is, as it drives "the performance in bars 1-6 and again toward the end" (Rink, 2001, p. 441). Rink's criticism continues with the later part of the Prelude:

[T]he argument breaks down when the lower parts unexpectedly and inexplicably veer into focus on the third beat of bar 18; the ensuing pitch reinforcement in bar 21 and rolled articulation in bar 23 seem equally contrived (Rink, 2001, p. 441).

Rink's description of Moiseiwitsch's interpretation is more or less accurate. And he has every reason to fault the performance. My goal, however, is not to refute Rink's criticism, as individual tastes will always shape our final evaluation of a performance. Rather I will endeavour to interpret Moiseiwitsch's performance in the light of Casals' idealism. Unlike the cellist, I will not ignore the illogical faults. Like Casals, however, I will not judge the performance by them either. Rather I will consider what merits these blemishes bring to light.

I will examine two passages brought to our attention by Rink. The first comes at bar 7, the very moment when Moiseiwitsch's interpretation ceases to become "mechanical" (Rink, 2001, p. 441). By rolling a chord at this unusual juncture, thus breaking up the drive in the left hand, the pianist articulates a pregnant passage of rhythmic stasis. In the midst of a continuous flow, one becomes aware of a temporal gap along the way, a moment of strained emptiness that is only resolved with the increased rhythmic activity in

³ On the notion of how an analysis or description (or performance) changes our conception of music, see Dubiel (2000). It could easily be argued that there is no inherent structure, that the appearance of one is entirely dependent on a given interpretation or analysis. Joel Lester, for instance, has suggested ways in which two performances can extract two equally valid structures from a given work. See Lester (1995).

the next bar. A subsequent analysis of the entire opening reveals a broader rhythmic dynamic that stands in opposition to the periodic phrasing of the melody.

In the second passage, Moiseiwitsch adds an unwritten third to the left hand's chord in bar 21, thereby opening up a window into Chopin's control of the musical texture. However, I can find no justification for Moiseiwitsch's modification. But when his added note is taken away, one observes a hole in the chord, a thinness of texture that coincides with the underlying deceptive harmony. Where Moiseiwitsch articulates a horizontal emptiness over bar 7, the pianist's error in bar 21 identifies a vertical point of emptiness, a composed gap that is so obviously sublime that most only recognise it when it is filled in.

The Eye in the Storm

Before I address Moiseiwitsch's performance, however, let us take a closer look at the Prelude as a whole. If we look only at the first half of the Prelude, we can trace the general harmonic motion from tonic to dominant. As the melody in the right hand strains but fails to ascend in the opening bar, the pulsing left hand pulls downward, descending at irregular moments, note by note. Harmonies are suggested, functions implied, but the gravity of the sliding motion overrides any diatonic resolution. Even as dissonant harmonies and suspensions are resolved by the passing of one note, another note often slips down alongside it, upsetting the balance. And once we finally reach the dominant harmony at the Prelude's midpoint, the music starts all over again from the beginning. The repetition of the opening follows an even more accelerated and complicated course, a path momentarily ruptured by an outburst in bars 16-18, before finally resolving in the final bar.⁴

Rink's (2001) initial criticism of Moiseiwitsch focuses on the pianist's driving left hand, which for the first six bars is described as "mechanical" (p. 441). Quibble as one may about this description, the pianist in bar 7 interrupts the incessantly driving pulses in the left hand with a chord rolled expressively from the bottom up. Broken chords in the left hand are not unusual in performances of this Prelude, or in fact in this particular rendition.⁵ Nevertheless, one might wonder why the downbeat of bar 7 receives this accented embellishment. Harmonically the music has arrived at a dominant seventh chord, one that may be expected (in vain) to resolve to the relative major. And the melody remains grounded on the A in spite of the repeated ascent to the B natural above.

If we limit our analysis to questions of harmony or melody, there is little more to say of this bar. Nor does it appear to make much harmonic sense for a pianist to emphasise the downbeat of bar 7 over those of the surrounding bars. What is Moiseiwitsch bringing to our attention? Or, to remove any debate of intentionality, how might we remark on this otherwise unremarkable bar now that our analytic spotlight has been trained more intensely at this one spot? Additionally, how might this rolled chord shed light on the larger conceit of Moiseiwitsch's broader interpretation, especially the opening six bars?

Bar 7, as it turns out, is the first bar since the opening bar to remain harmonically constant throughout (see Figure 2). Not a single note slides down; the music begins and ends in the same place. Even in the midst of tense instability, the listener is faced with a temporal respite, a breath before the continued descent. But an extended examination of bar 7 within its larger context reveals that this bar represents the continuation of a melodic

⁴ For a sensitive account of the second half of the Prelude, see Schachter, 1994, especially pp. 165-66, 175-76.

⁵ Alfred Cortot, for instance, rolls chords in bars 1, 3, 8, 10, 15, 19, 21, and 22. Others are more sparing. Katsaris rolls the left hand only once, in bar 8, whereas Novaes rolls the left hand quickly in bar 16 as the climax approaches. Moiseiwitsch, himself, also rolls chords in bars 10, 16, 17, 18, and 24.

line that begins long before: not only the A in the right hand, but the persistent C in the alto voice which manages to stay afloat for two bars while its roots sink below.

By tracing the line of the alto, we begin to see how this voice, especially in Moiseiwitsch's interpretation, offers an enlightening path through Chopin's Prelude. From the opening sonority, Moiseiwitsch emphasises the alto voice over the other two voices in the left hand. As the first six bars unfold, Moiseiwitsch reinforces this line, following its chromatic descent from E to C.

This interpretation is illuminating. In the first bar, the weight of the pianist's voicing serves to stabilise the harmony, bringing out the root of the E minor chord, a chord presented in its weaker first inversion.⁶ From the second bar where the left hand begins to dissolve below, the alto voice begins to establish a rhythmic pattern, a large-scale syncopation, one set in direct opposition to the melody in the soprano voice (see Figure 2). The right hand, introduced with an ascending anacrusis, launches a rhythmic pattern that repeatedly stresses the downbeat of every bar. This pulse is only reinforced by the oscillating motive in the melody: the momentary ascent on the fourth beat and the sinking reinforcement of the downbeat in the subsequent bar. While the rhythmic ebb and flow of the soprano is guided by the first beat, the alto voice emerges on the third beat, first in bar 2, descending from E to E flat, and again in bar 3, as the descent continues to D. In bar 4 the D is held one beat too long, and consequently, as though overflowing with pent-up pressure, it tumbles down two steps to the C in bar 5.⁷ But if this extension of the alto voice by one beat results in such acceleration, one that is further enhanced by the melodic descent in the soprano, consider the ensuing tension created by alto line's persistence over the next three and a half bars.

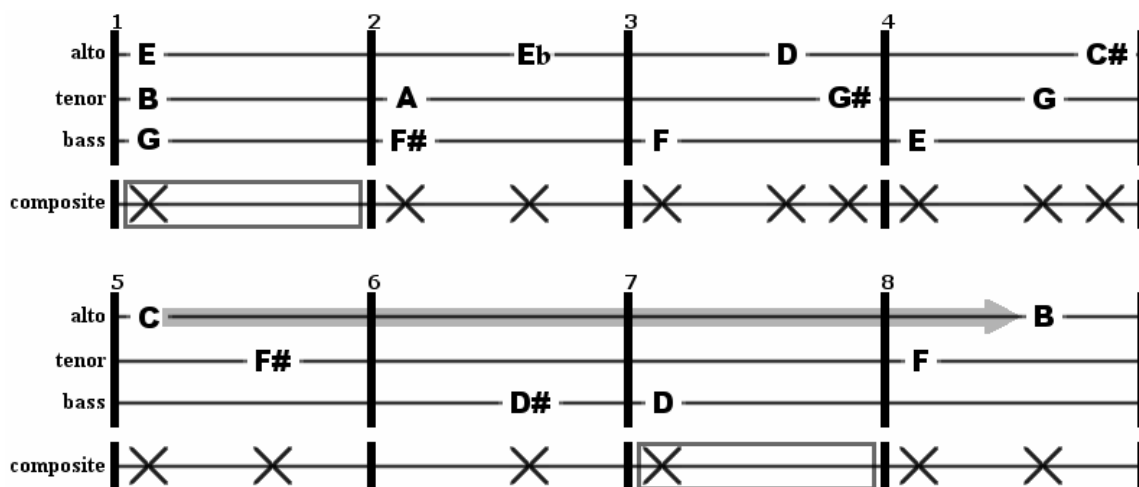


Figure 2. Rhythmic voice-leading in the left hand of Chopin Prelude Op. 28, No. 4, bars 1-8. The "X" indicates the change of any note in the accompaniment. Bars 1 and 7 are the only moments where no changes occur after the downbeat.

⁶ For a discussion of this opening sonority, see Schachter, 1995, p. 150.

⁷ Although I do not want to suggest that the alto line is the only source of tension, it is most disruptive line. In bar 2 the tenor and bass reinforce the downbeat, while the alto divides the bar. In bar 3, while the bass changes on the downbeat again, the tenor line's descent to the G sharp aids the acceleration. Additionally, as performed by Moiseiwitsch, the alto line comes to the fore dynamically.

During this passage, the tenor and bass continue to sink while the alto and soprano lines remain immobile. In bars 5-6, first the tenor and then the bass continue the syncopated pattern established by the alto in the opening bars, by descending on the third beat of each bar. With the establishment of this pattern, it could be expected that another voice will descend halfway through bar 7. Considering its immobility since the downbeat of bar 5, the alto voice would be a logical choice.⁸ But instead nothing happens after the downbeat of bar 7 and we are left in a moment of tense anticipation, poised above a precipice without dropping. Before we resolve this suspenseful moment, with the C in the alto voice refusing to budge, let us consider the manner with which Moiseiwitsch articulates this dramatic crux.

Bowing the Piano

For most pianists, the movement in the lower two voices compensates for the upper two, providing enough rhythmic activity to account for the strangeness in bar 7. But in the hands of Benno Moiseiwitsch, it is not the continuing bass line that we hear, nor the repeated swells in the soprano. Rather, by persistently bringing out the alto voice, the pianist reveals an alternative drama embedded in the structure of Chopin's score. Moiseiwitsch draws our attention to this moment by rolling the chord at the beginning of the bar, both breaking the tension of the continuous line while reinforcing it at the same time.

But there is more to the rolled chord. Moiseiwitsch seems intent on amplifying the tension caused by the unrelenting alto line. This voice is repeatedly brought out in his rendition and it takes on a crucial dramatic role. By rolling the chord, Moiseiwitsch begins the note anew, presenting it above a modified harmony. The note is the same, the tension even greater, but it is now rooted elsewhere. It is as though the pianist mimics the changing of strings by a violinist or the shifting of tonal colours by a singer.

Indeed, Moiseiwitsch appears, perhaps unconsciously, to invoke a technique employed by the string players of his generation — Fritz Kreisler, Joseph Szigeti, and Pablo Casals — all performers whose playing he knew.⁹ Faced with a single note sustained over a period of time, violinists and cellists such as these often worked to present it as a polychromatic tone. By changing the pace and pressure of the bow and the speed of the vibrato, a string player can present a single note in many different ways. Another way to manipulate the tonal colour is to change strings. String players, especially earlier in the 20th century, purposefully slid their left hand from a note on the higher string up to the same note on a lower string. On the new string, the pitch is the same, but the colour is usually darker. To emphasise the transformation in timbre, earlier string players used a clearly audible portamento to lead the listener from one kind of sound to another. Limited by the nature of his instrument, Moiseiwitsch re-creates this musical scoop heard usually on a string instrument by rolling from the bottom of the chord back to the original note, C.

The rolling of the chord has the power to compel the listener to look more closely at this bar, a bar passed over by both pianists and analysts. Unless drawn to this bar by the rolled re-articulation of the alto line, a listener or pianist could easily continue on without recognition of this moment's significance. Moiseiwitsch's imitation of a sliding cello reveals an interesting contradiction, namely, how the repetition of the C in the alto can be

⁸ With the exception of the soprano, no other voices are sustained as long as the alto line here. The bass and tenor never hold a single note for more than 2 ½ bars. And even the soprano continues straining through its upper neighbour.

⁹ Older singers, similarly, articulated the change of syllables by sliding up to the very note that they had already been singing. For a discussion of this particular technique by Joseph Szigeti and its earlier use by Giovanni Viotti, see Szigeti (1979, p. 63).

understood as a continuation or extension of the same musical line while also articulating an increased tension. The bar is a respite from the surrounding rhythmic activity, a moment to breathe, but also a pregnant pause in the eye in the storm, an almost empty gasp filled with anticipation.

Gravitational Voice-leading

A further examination of this moment reveals an even greater extension of this contradictory bar. The opening eight bars can be broken into two groups of four, a demarcation made most clearly by the melody in the soprano and the slur connecting the first eight bars (from B to A).¹⁰ But the second group of four bars, as we will see, is not as stable as it would appear. Schachter (1994) has noted how Chopin develops the opening bars through a series of 7-6 suspensions in the left hand. Were we to focus only on the relationship between the bass and alto voices, the lines that frame the suspensions, we would notice a drop-off of activity in bars 6-8. An exploration of the relationship between the soprano voice and alto, however, reveals something more.

As the Prelude begins, the alto can be heard a fifth below the soprano line. Two and half bars later, this interval is expanded to a sixth. Any expansion to a seventh would push the music to a dissonance in instant need of resolution. In bar 4 the alto hints at this potential explosion, dropping to a C-sharp against what had been a B in the soprano. But it is at this point that the soprano voice also drops, first to a B flat, and then immediately to an A in bar 5 while the alto descent stops at C, bringing the intervallic distance safely back to a sixth.

In bar 5, the gathering of gravitational tension begins again, but at this point with the burdening accumulation of intervallic weight. Bar 5 is not a return to the beginning in spite of the melodic similarity, but a strained extension. The top voice of the 6/3 chord, that initially hung a fifth below the melodic chord in the soprano, has stretched down a whole step. In other words, while the melody dropped from B to A, the left hand has sunk twice as far. Not only has the distance between the soprano and alto expanded from a fifth to a sixth, but instead of beginning with a harmonically stable triad as in bar 1, we begin with a more dissonant seventh-chord, with the A in the soprano grating against the G in the tenor. As described earlier, the second group of four bars begins with a continuation of the previous descent. Unlike the opening bar, there is no rhythmically stable bar from which to depart. Already, the syncopation that we see in bar 2 has begun. Halfway through bar 5, the tenor voice pulls away from the seventh in the soprano voice, dropping to an F sharp. A bar later, the bass line drops down a half step, providing a diminished fifth relation with the soprano. Exacerbated by this dissonance, Chopin accelerates the bass's descent, bringing it to a more consonant D natural in bar 7.

But here Chopin breaks away from this syncopation and for good reason. Were the alto line to have descended to B halfway through bar 7, it would have opened up a seventh with the soprano line. With such a dissonant separation, Chopin would have needed to bring the melodic line down a step prematurely, thereby disturbing the four-bar grouping that helps balance the opening twelve bar. By maintaining the apparent stability of four-bar phrases, Chopin actually amplifies the gravitational force pulling the voices.

When we consider the phrase structure's relationship to the harmonic progression, we can recognise bar 7 as a subtle but dramatic breach in the narrative. Chopin had at least two other options for this bar. Given the descending design already established, the com-

¹⁰ It is worth noting that while Chopin groups the first eight bars of the right hand, the first twelve bars of the left hand are grouped together.

current until the pressure becomes too great and overflows into bar 9ff.¹³

In his analysis of this Prelude, Schachter (1994) draws our attention to the nature of the musical form, the division of the piece into two almost equal sections (twelve and thirteen bars respectively), and arranged as a kind of antecedent-consequent phrase. Schachter's interest lies in the brilliant observation that the consequent phrase (bars 13-25) both replicates and accelerates the opening twelve bars. But his discussion and the subsequent analytic reductions conceal the volatile nature of the Prelude's antecedent phrase. Without doubt bars 13-25 are more vigorous. Nevertheless the opening of the Prelude is hardly as regular as the melodic line alone would indicate.

The four-bar phrases outlined by the soprano line overshadow the irregularly disruptive shifts of the rhythmic tectonic plates in the left hand. The harmony does not merely shift in accordance with the melodic periods, it ebbs and flows in highly uneven ways. As shown in Figure 2, the left hand descends in spurts; the sustaining of one voice or the holding back of another thwarts any emerging pattern.

In hindsight I might have made these same analytical observations from the score alone. But my recognition of this potential musical drama derives from Moiseiwitsch's unique rendition of the Prelude. His insistent articulation of the alto voice, reinforced by the rolled chord in bar 7, allows me to refocus my analytical lens and to see this passage in a new light. Moiseiwitsch's musical path is by no means the only interpretive possibility. Rather, he joins the multitude of interpreters, from Cherkassky and Argerich to Schachter and Rink, all of whom aspire to illuminate the music that they re-create in sound or prose.

Filling the Much Needed Gap

There are moments, however, when a performer appears to take one liberty too many. Take, for instance, the deceptive cadence near the end of the Prelude at bar 21. Moiseiwitsch, as Rink points out, fills in the third of the chord in the left hand where Chopin leaves it open. On some level, Moiseiwitsch's rendition makes "musical sense". According to the paths of voice leading, the pianist's added E resolves the D sharp in the tenor line (see Figure 4). The doubling of a third is also conventional for a deceptive cadence. Additionally one might argue that the thicker texture gives weight or strength to the harmonic deception.

For those left unsatisfied by my justifications (as I am), the unsettling grain of sand inserted by the pianist may yet leave us with a pearl of perception. In other words, there is much to be gained by recognizing the pianist's addition even if we do not agree with it. As the incomparable Peter Whiffle once quipped, "error also has its merits" (Van Vechten, 1923, p. 192).¹⁴

The interpretive disruption serves as an accent, a flaw that allows us to recognise the means for attaining such a sublime moment. By adding the extra E in bar 21, Moiseiwitsch reveals to us an absence that is almost always overlooked. A more conventional reading of this bar focuses on the deceptive cadence that thwarts, among other things, what Schachter calls the "descending impulse", the need for the bass to push down to the tonic

¹³ Carl Schachter has noted that the second half of the Prelude presents an acceleration of first half, that it takes only eight bars (bars 13-20) to traverse a harmonic progression that originally required twelve bars (1-12). It is worth noting that the C that Moiseiwitsch emphasises so much in the alto voice in bars 5-8 is almost entirely removed from the repetition. The alto jumps from C sharp to A sharp in bar 16 and only returns to C for a single occurrence in bar 18 before resolving to B. The leap to the high C in the soprano line of bar 17 might even suggest a vain attempt at reclaiming the absent pitch. See Schachter (1994, pp. 175-6).

¹⁴ Voltaire, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, is to have said, "Croyez moi, l'erreur aussi a son merite." Joseph Slater, however, has suggested that the maxim originated in America. See Emerson (2003, p. 274).

(Schachter, 1995, p. 151). This is also the first time that the melodic line finally resolves to the E it had been moving towards the entire time. Yet in order to avoid closure prematurely, Chopin slides the harmony up to a submediant, prolonging the E minor resolution until the final chord.

a. Original



b. As played by Benno Moiseiwitsch



Figure 4. Chopin Prelude Op. 28, No.4, bars 20-21

But this bar is more than a harmonic deception; it can also be seen as a momentary collapse. For the first time in the entire Prelude, the left hand has been reduced to a single dyad, and not only that, a hollowed-out fifth.¹⁵ By comparison to everything that precedes it, this moment stands out; the left hand is texturally barren. The leading tone of the previous bar not only fails to lead us to the tonic, but it fails to lead us anywhere. The voice leading brings us to the absence of a voice: a sonic void.¹⁶

This observation urges us to consider Chopin's control of the musical texture and its relationship to larger aspects of musical form and structure. Up until this false cadence, Chopin meticulously maintains a regular four-part texture, except for two moments. The first occurs in bar 12 when the left hand ceases entirely while the melody in the soprano regains the opening melodic line. Free from the insistent and driving chords in the left hand, the soprano moves without restriction. Most pianists allow themselves to breathe. They take more time, many of them extending Chopin's triplet before being sucked back into the more rhythmically rigorous texture of bar 13.

Not long after this caesura we see Chopin thicken the texture in bars 17-18 in order to amplify the climactic surge. As the right hand becomes more active, leaping up a seventh in bar 16 and bar 17, the left hand adds up to three voices, breaking a massive dominant ninth chord over the first two beats of bar 17. Immediately after the soprano recoils in bar

¹⁵ I would like to thank Erin Peters for this observation. One might argue that the doubled Bs in bar 17 and the low A in bar 18 challenge my claim. It would seem, however, that these low notes are part of a larger chord broken over two beats.

¹⁶ The argument can be made the E in the soprano line resolves the D sharp. Although I would not challenge this assertion in theory, in practice this explanation fails to negate the hollowness of the open fifth and the unresolved tenor line.

18, the left hand reverts to its three-voice accompaniment, almost as though nothing had happened.

But in bar 21 the search for a comforting textural and harmonic resolution is thwarted. The attempt at recuperation after the musical climax is denied. Chopin pushes the textural dissolution too far. Not only is the harmonic resolution evaded, but also the stripping away of the structural left hand presents us with an austere and desolate sonority. The missing note reappears three beats later, but without any harmonic arrival on the tonic.

“Room Filled with Empty People”

With the recognition of this sublime detail we can easily fault Moiseiwitsch for either his sloppiness or blatant rewriting at this moment. But without this added note we might not have observed the necessity of this gap in the texture. Chopin writes a beautifully absent note, an absence gone overlooked. Only by seizing upon Moiseiwitsch’s erroneous addition we miss what should be missing.

It is ironic that it takes a musical act, an imperfect performance, to hear moments where the action stops. Our modes of analysis and criticism are usually geared towards studying that which happens. At both this instance and at bar 7, Moiseiwitsch emphasises a moment of musical void. In bar 7 he articulates a bar where, for the first time since the beginning, nothing happens. Similarly, in bar 21, his “oversight” reveals a moment where a voice vanishes (after the leading tone no less) and the chord is filled with emptiness.¹⁷

The performance as a whole is far from perfect and it may fail to compel a listener musically. Perhaps the idiosyncrasies and mistakes distract us from a cohesive musical whole. But it is all too easy to find faults with any performance, especially when held up to an unattainable ideal. We need not forgive performers for their errors, but we should thank them for their revelations.

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¹⁷ Jonathan Dunsby, as Rink notes, suggests “that the left hand’s sudden prominence in bar 21 might reflect Moiseiwitsch’s desire to bring out the upper G, a pitch with only limited melodic presence thus far.” See Rink (2001, p. 444).

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