



Robert Levin, piano

In 18th century Germany the word “prelude” was also used as a verb (“*praeludieren*”): keyboard performers would improvise such preludes to connect the key of the piece just finished with the one they next wished to perform. Likewise, they would improvise at the beginning of a performance, presenting the key of the music to come while they acquainted themselves with the tonal and mechanical characteristics of the instrument. (This practice was continued well into the 20th century by many keyboard virtuosos.) In Mozart’s own words, taken from a letter to Nannerl written in Paris July 20, 1778 and sent together with a newly-composed prelude, “this is not a prelude to go from one key to another, but rather a *capriccio*—to try out the keyboard.” The mere idea of playing a piece in b minor after a piece in c minor, or a piece in E-flat major after one in A major—a commonplace in today’s recital programs—would have outraged an 18th century musician.

The nature of these preludes is rather different from composed music: they often eschew a fixed meter, consisting of cascades of virtuoso figuration unlike anything else Mozart wrote. While related to the cadenzas, their perpetual flamboyance and impulsiveness may astonish some listeners. In no other compositions are we so close to Mozart the master improviser. Their continuity relies upon a harmonic outline which can easily be reduced to a figured bass. Indeed, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach *Essay on the True Manner of Playing Keyboard Instruments* advocates using a figured bass as the foundation for free fantasies.

The prelude Mozart sent from Paris does not seem to have survived: his specific description of its ending does not match any piece we know. However, his title “*Capriccio*” has long been assigned to a work in C major that bears the Köchel number 395 (300g). This turns out to be another work entirely: a collection of four preludes that Mozart sent to Nannerl along with his letter of October 11, 1777 (the folds in letter and music match up). These were long assumed to be lost, and were assigned the Köchel number 284a. The first three of these modulate; the first one moves from C major to B-flat major. Nannerl had requested just such a modulating prelude in her letter to Wolfgang of September 28, 1777. The notation of these four preludes, the first three ending with incomplete measures marked off by double bars and fermatas, shows clearly that a performance straight through them was not intended.

Tonight’s program consists of a series of larger pieces in keys that allow these modulating preludes to connect them in the manner that Mozart and Nannerl intended. Thus, the evening will unfold in a manner that a late 18th-century listener would not just appreciate, but expect. The free fantasy to be improvised after the intermission—a staple of Mozart’s public performance—will be based upon themes in the style of Mozart (or by Mozart) to be notated by members of the audience during the intermission and brought to the lip of the stage by an usher at the commencement of the second half of the program. Depending upon the key in which the fantasy ends, a modulating prelude may have to be improvised to connect with the rest of the program.

Program

Piano Piece in C major (found within the manuscript of the *Grabmusik*, K42)(Fragment, completed by Robert Levin): Salzburg, 1767. This 25-bar fragment is notated on a leaf that is part of the manuscript to Mozart’s early burial cantata.

Four Preludes, K.284a (usually known as *Capriccio in C Major*, K.395/300g), No. 1: C major to B-flat major: Munich, early October 1777 (see above).

Sonata in B-flat, K.333: Linz, 1783. One of Mozart’s suavest and richest solo works, its first movement abounds not just in grace, but in whimsy and wit; the middle movement radiates tenderness, and the finale is a close relative to Bach’s “*Italian Concerto*,” incorporating solo and orchestra into a brilliantly idiomatic bravura piece complete with cadenza.

Four Preludes, K.284a, No. 2: B-flat major to E-flat major.

Sonata in E-flat, K.282/189g: Munich, 1775. The fourth of Mozart’s cycle of six sonatas K.279-284, it shares its key and its unusual sequence of movements with the “*Kegelstatt*” Trio for piano, clarinet and viola, K.498: it begins with a slow movement instead of the standard allegro (a pensive adagio viz-à-viz the gentle 6/8 swaying andante of K.498), continues with a minuet in the dominant key, and concludes with *brio*.

Intermission

Tuesday, March 6, 2018 – 8:00 p.m.

Chapin Hall

Williamstown, Massachusetts

*Please turn off cell phones.
No photography or recording is permitted.*

Post-Intermission

Improvised Fantasy

Four Preludes, K.284a, No. 3: E-flat major to c minor.

Overture to *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (K.384)(1782), arranged by Mozart. We cannot be exactly sure when Mozart composed this skillful reduction of the *Seraglio* overture, which was published in 1785 but not reprinted until 2006 within the Wiener Urtext Edition's second volume of the piano pieces; it is not used in the standard vocal scores. Mozart's hand can be seen in the clever rewriting of the sustained oboe line in the middle section. The reduction, like the original version, ends not with the tonic chord of C major, but on the dominant, G—a question rather than an answer. In the opera the question is answered by the first aria, in C major, using the same theme as the middle section of the overture. In tonight's recital, the affirmation is provided by the last of the four preludes:

Four Preludes, K.284a, No. 4: Capriccio in C major—neither a modulating connection nor a conclusion, but rather a flurry of boisterous virtuosity. It requires a follow-up, here provided by the final work of the program:

Sonata in C, K.330: Salzburg or Vienna, 1783. The outer movements abound in good spirits and the Andante cantabile is one of Mozart's most personal cantilenas—a work that is as rewarding to the player in the quiet of the living room as on the concert stage.

Fortepiano or Concert Grand?

A generation ago anyone playing Mozart or Beethoven on historic instruments was an oddity. Harpsichords were just being revived, thanks to the pioneering efforts of artists such as Wanda Landowska and her pupil Ralph Kirkpatrick, and harpsichord makers such as William Dowd and Frank Hubbard. The extension of historically informed performance onward from Baroque to Classical and Romantic music has been a fascinating process carried out largely through a cooperative effort between record companies (undoubtedly seeking something new) and such artists as conductors Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Gustav Leonhardt, Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Christopher Hogwood, Sir Roger Norrington, and pianists such as Malcolm Bilson, Steven Lubin, Andreas Staier and Melvyn Tan. Most of these artists have chosen to specialize in performances with historic instruments, convinced that the gestures and sounds of music are most ideally expressed by the instruments for which they were actually written. The concept of progress is applicable to technology but is equivocal in artistry: the enormous concentration of power wrought by Heinrich Steinway's transformation of the concert grand piano in the mid 1860's helped make the large concert halls of today possible; but the slower decay of sound and the heavier action made the lighter and subtler shading, and the independence of registers, of the older instruments much more difficult to achieve. The oft-heard remark "Beethoven certainly would have preferred a Steinway if he had had the choice" might best be answered with "Perhaps—but then he would have written different music." The articulation, accentuation and dynamics of a piece always derive from the acoustical properties of the instrument known to the composer. If it were otherwise, the composer would be a less sensitive artist!

In any case, it is not a choice between old instruments and the "modern piano:" as Malcolm Bilson says, the choice is between copies of pianos from 1770-1880 (less often, of the originals) and copies of pianos of 1890—which is what the Steinway, Bösendorfer, Yamaha, Bechstein *et al* are. Personally I have chosen to follow parallel careers on historical instruments and the Steinway. I much enjoy playing Mozart and Schubert on the Steinway, where it is a transcription of sorts, which does not contradict the particular pleasure of performing Beethoven on a Graf or a Broadwood. In any case, my strong commitment to French music and contemporary music would prevent my specializing even if I were otherwise tempted to do so. – *Robert Levin*

Robert Levin is presented by the Williams College Department of Music
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Upcoming Events

MIDWEEKMUSIC

Wed Mar 7 | Chapin Hall | 12:15 PM | free

Master Class – Robert Levin, piano

Wed Mar 7 | Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall | 4:15 PM | free

Williams Chamber Players

Fri Mar 9 | Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall | 8:00 PM | free

MIDWEEKMUSIC

Wed Mar 14 | Chapin Hall | 12:15 PM | free

Master Class – Cassatt String Quartet

Wed Mar 14 | Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall | 4:15 PM | free

Cassatt String Quartet

Thu Mar 15 | Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall | 8:00 PM | free

Soovin Kim, violin

Tue Apr 3 | Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall | 8:00 PM | free