

Sergey Rachmaninoff

Prelude

in C-sharp Minor
Opus 3, no. 2

PS Instructive Edition
&
PS Urtext

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About the Prelude in C-sharp Minor

Rachmaninoff composed the Prelude in C-sharp minor in the late summer of 1892, at the age of 18, and first performed it at the Moscow Electric Exhibition in September of 1892. This was the beginning of the career of one of the world's most popular piano pieces - it shortly became known simply as "The Prelude." Audiences would clamor for it by shouting "C-sharp minor!" while applauding other pieces, and even towards the end of Rachmaninoff's career it was reported that no recital of his ever ended without this prelude as a final encore.

The immense popularity of this prelude perhaps even made it harder for Rachmaninoff to reach out with his later works, which were always viewed and understood in terms of his early success and the Prelude's status as a near-popular song. Critics have often been quick to highlight their own superiority by dismissing the C-sharp minor prelude as a shallow and mediocre work.



It is tempting to describe this piece in terms of paradox: it *sounds* sensationallly virtuosic and *looks* very difficult to play—both in terms of the score's layout and in the gestures and movements required by the pianist—yet it by no means belongs to the most difficult piano repertoire, and is often approached and mastered by advanced amateur pianists. Its musical content is really simple and could perhaps even be called thin, but so far it hasn't lost any of its massive effect, and promises to live on and speak as powerfully to future generations.

The atmosphere of the first section may be likened to a solemn procession or ritual; in contrast, the chromatic sequential phrases in the second section (measures 14-42) are almost frantic. When the first theme returns, it is in "a mood of grandeur and power, as if illustrating the inevitable survival of some great and mighty truth" (Godowsky), but the Coda returns to the mysterious and reflective atmosphere - as if the question posed at the beginning is left unanswered after all.

The juxtaposed fortissimo and pianissimo passages suggest the tolling of bells and their echoes, and the piece picked up its nickname, "The Bells of Moscow," quite early in its life. As for its inspiration, Rachmaninoff once told an interviewer: "*...one day the prelude simply came and I put it down. It came with such force that I could not shake it off even though I tried to do so. It had to be - so there it was*".

Preparatory exercises and practice tips

The first section (until M. 11):

The most effective way to learn the first section is to separate the music into its smaller elements which you practice and then gradually put together.

Start with the chords but omit the middle voice and practice them as octaves, each hand separately. Then put both hands together and establish a sense of two voice polyphony.

The next step is to add full chords in the right hand while maintaining octaves in the left. Then do the opposite; play full chords in the left and octaves in the right. Practice each of the four models below a few times without the bass. When mastered, repeat with the bass (grey notes) added. Learn each new bar in the first section this way.

Example, bar 2:



Alternative fingering for the chords:

In measure 12, Rachmaninoff introduces slurs over the three-note motive C#-E-D# suggesting an expressive phrasing as opposed to the more bell-like appearance of the motive earlier in this section. Some editions suggest a slur over the three-note motive consequently from measure 2. If aiming for this fully legitimate approach, a more suitable fingering is to use 4-5-4 in the RH top voice and 5-4-5 in LH bottom voice, assuming your hands are big enough.

The Agitato-section (M. 14-35):

Practice the triplets grouped into chords. Then rhythmize, vary the articulation and combine the chords in different ways. Finally practice the top voice of the triplets supported by a heavy arm and the two following triplets with a light and quick touch.

You can also rhythmize the triplet-pattern (long-short-short) while maintaining a heavy top note. Below are examples of a few of the ideas.

Example, bar 14:



Experiment and invent your own variations and use them throughout the whole agitato-section. Don't forget to also practice this whole section exactly as written in various tempos safely below your current upper limit but with full musical expression. Most piano students need to practice this section extensively before being ready to perform the piece. Luckily, it is fun to play!

The "martellato"-section (from beat 3 in M. 35 until M. 42):

First learn the chord progressions like crotchet-chords.

Also practice making each diminished chord (the 1st and 3rd in the example) into an arpeggio starting with the two notes in the left hand followed by the three in the right hand.



The Tempo primo section (M. 45-52):

Use the same practice method as in the first section. Make sure you don't sit too close to the piano. For obtaining a full fortissimo sound you need plenty of space and free, heavy arms. Keep your body upright and supportive but also supple, leaning to the sides to accommodate the big leaps.

PRELUDE

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Lento

Using both the second and third finger here will give your hand the stability needed for the **ff**-sound.

ff

ppp

Stay with your hands on this c-sharp octave and listen to the sound dying away. Then move your arms calmly in position for the **ppp** chords. You've got plenty of time!

Using the second finger for the middle voice throughout is a simple solution that both provides a good angle for the right hand and helps achieving a suitable bell-like sound.

Ped.

As the music moves to a higher register, leave the **ppp** dynamic and play with a slightly fuller sound.

Smaller hands could use the fifth finger for the top voice throughout, but still try to achieve the notated legato.

ppp

mf

In his recordings, Rachmaninoff moves the tempo forward quite a lot in these two measures.

Make the lowest g-sharp the loudest, and use half pedal changes to keep the pedal point sounding through the whole measure.

As a contrast, play these three chords really cleanly, with full pedal changes.

ppp

Note the added slurs in measures 12-13. Stay close to the keys and play this passage extremely legato.

ppp

This fingering might seem a little awkward at first, but is the only one that will allow you to play this passage with real finger legato.

Rachmaninoff in his recordings brings out the left hand very markedly in this measure, and makes a big ritardando.

Agitato

Bring out the change from four-note to two note slurring: use armweight on the first note of the slur and play the second note lightly on the way up.

mf

crescendo

Use half pedal here to keep the low c sharp ringing.

Alternative pedalling: Consider using this pedalling to help bring the four-note motif forward and to emphasize the change to two-note slurring in measure 16.

Rachmaninoff makes a marked *rallentando* here in all his recordings of the piece.

diminuendo

mf

crescendo

The continued twice-in-a-bar pedalling here might seem a bit schematic, but works very well, at least when the passage is played at the intended speed.

Make sure you reach a low point here before the outburst in m. 27. Play lightly with no harsh or heavy accents and consider using a little less pedal in this measure.

Don't force the sound here. Play the left hand c-sharp really powerfully but for the rest, keep a light touch and make speed the top priority.

diminuendo *crescendo* **ff**

The early pedal will stop the large left hand leap from disrupting the flow, and ensures a full sound at the beginning of the measure.

diminuendo

crescendo

Consider using the fourth finger - the extra leap needed for this fingering will add energy and power.

Despite the **fff**, refrain from making loudness and power the main objective here. You haven't reached the real climax of the piece yet! Aim for lightning speed, and play the chords quite crisply, while using a lot of pedal.

fff

Alternative fingering: 1 2 3 1 3 1 3 1 2 3

This is one obvious place where pedalling will have to be adjusted to instrument, acoustics and your particular style of playing. Still, it is advisable to keep the pedal down for long stretches while in the higher regions of the keyboard, and to change more often as the music moves down to a lower register.

Tempo primo

Despite the 'Tempo primo' marking, the rhythmic approach should be quite different here than in the first bars. The floating, mysterious feel of the beginning is best served by a more relaxed approach, while this final outburst must have great forward drive.

No half pedalling needed, since every new chord is so massive that it takes over from the preceding one without any disturbing blurring effects.

Half pedal changes from here, to make the texture slightly more transparent.

Alternative pedalling:



51

diminuendo

diminuendo

Consider making the full pedal change on the last eighth-note of the previous measure instead. This sounds surprisingly well and helps avoiding a break in the big sound here.

Don't make too much of the diminuendo in measures 53-54. The *mf* chords from measure 55 should still sound full and heavy. Save the real tapering off until the last three measures or so. Listen to the inner voices, which give each chord its harmonic direction and color.

54

diminuendo

mf

ppp

diminuendo

mf

ppp

PRELUDE

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Lento

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ff

ppp

mf

ppp

ppp

14 **Agitato**

17

20

24

28

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32

crescendo

35

fff

38

41

fff *ff*

Tempo primo

45

m.d. fff pesante *ffff* *m.g. fff pesante*

48

ffff

ffff

51

diminuendo

diminuendo

54

diminuendo

mf

ppp

diminuendo

mf

ppp

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