Recollections of an Imagined Student of Frédéric Chopin:
His Teaching as Exemplified by his Preludes.

An Honors Lecture/Recital (HONRS 499)

by

Jennifer A. Duquaine

Thesis Advisor
James Helton

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
April, 2002

Expected date of graduation: December, 2002
Acknowledgments

Many thanks are due to Dr. James Helton, my advisor for this project. He offered unfailing support and very valuable advice throughout every step of the way. Besides serving as my piano teacher and helping me to learn, understand, and memorize the Chopin and Bach preludes that I played on my recital, he also helped guide my research for the lecture. Thank you Dr. Helton for giving of your time and talent to increase my knowledge of a truly magnificent composer and his music.
Rationale

Several factors contributed to my choice of topic for this honors project. Foremost was my identity as a musician. As a pianist, I identify closely with the music of Frédéric Chopin. His standard as a pianist’s composer remains unsurpassed, and his music has universal appeal. As my profession will allow scant time or opportunity for developing and maintaining a high level of pianism, the idea of a performance based project seemed particularly appropriate as a milestone in my own development. Because I had studied several Chopin Preludes in the past, I decided that to do a larger segment of his preludes in Op. 28 would be enriching for me while lending itself to many educational opportunities in the future. A more elaborate explanation of possible teaching scenarios would be best understood at the end of this presentation. Please refer to the conclusion for my teaching ideas.

Knowing my audience would be composed of a number of people who are interested in, but not particularly knowledgeable about music, I decided to keep technical analysis of the preludes to a minimum. Instead, I chose to describe each prelude in overarching terms that the general public could understand. In addition to making the lecture understandable to my audience, I strove to create avenues for affective connections in the hope of showing the enduring relevancy of this music. I did this by giving the lecture from the point of view of a fictitious woman who, in her youth, had studied the piano with Chopin. During the lecture, this woman, whom I named Genevieve de Charney, spoke about her experiences as Chopin’s pupil and also gave background information about the composer’s life and times. This character was also the one who described the preludes.
In total, I learned and performed ten of the Chopin Preludes Op. 28. When choosing the preludes that I would perform, I made a point of picking pieces that would contrast and would also paint a relatively accurate picture of the group of preludes as a whole. I chose preludes of varying keys, both major and minor. I also chose preludes of varying tempos and moods. In addition, my recital was not made up entirely of Chopin’s preludes. I also played four of Johann Sebastian Bach’s preludes and one of the accompanying fugues (from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I). I chose to add these Bach preludes to the recital for a couple of reasons. First, Chopin was very much influenced by the works of Bach. As a matter of fact, it is quite possible that he based his set of preludes on those of Bach. Secondly, Chopin assigned Bach’s works to all of his students. I found it perfectly natural to include some of Bach’s works in a recital about Chopin’s teaching. In the following pages, I will present my lecture, explain my ideas about how this project can be used in the future, and provide notes and bibliographic information.
The Lecture

Good afternoon, my name is Genevieve de Charney. I have recently begun the search for a piano teacher for my two young children. Naturally, the process brings to mind my own experiences, some ten years ago, of studying the piano. I was fortunate enough to study with the famous and talented Frédéric Chopin. I would like to take some time this afternoon to describe the years I spent as Chopin’s pupil, but before I go into any detail about this, I should attempt to acquaint you with Chopin and the events in his life previous to my association with him.

Frédéric Chopin was born on March 1, 1810 in Zelazowa Wola, Poland. He was the son of a French father, Nicholas, and a Polish mother, Justyna. From a very young age, Chopin showed a considerable interest in music, and he was extremely talented. In many ways he was like another Mozart. He was largely self-taught and by seven years of age, he was already composing and playing publicly.

After finishing his formal education at the Lyceum in Warsaw where his father worked, Chopin decided to expand his horizons by traveling abroad. Little did he know that he would never return home. Soon after he left, political unrest began in Poland. In 1830, citizens from the kingdom of Poland attempted to rebel against the Russians, who controlled much of the surrounding area. The Russians came in and brutally crushed this revolt. The country was then ultimately taken over by the Russians, and Chopin was unable to return home.

Chopin eventually settled in Paris. He had a modest apartment at first, but after a few years of teaching and composing, he was able to move to a more luxurious apartment in the Rue de la Chausée d’Antin. Chopin spent most of his time in the company of
fellow musicians and fellow displaced Poles, but he certainly had an affinity for high society, as well, and we were glad to receive him into our homes.6

M. Chopin gave his first concert in Paris on February 26, 1832. The extraordinary musician performed only rarely in concerts after this. He did not enjoy public performance in such a large setting. His playing was much more suited to the more intimate setting of the salon, where he gave most of his succeeding public performances.7

Chopin also spent quite a bit of time composing during his years in Paris. It is significant to note that Chopin never wrote anything that didn’t at least contain a piano. Chopin wrote in some standard forms such as the sonata, the variation set, and the piano concerto. More importantly, he elevated other forms such as the polonaise, the mazurka, the nocturne, the étude, and the prelude, making these forms famous. Above all, he took the centuries-old literary form—the ballade—on which he could have made his name alone, and created the quintescential epic work for piano.

It was in the late 1830’s that Frédéric Chopin met a woman who would have a large impact on his life, the novelist Aurora Dudevant, known as George Sand. His impression of her was not favorable at first.8 Apparently, he later began to see her in a different light, because by April of 1838 they were romantically involved. It was an unlikely pairing; they were so different from each other.9 While Chopin was somewhat conservative and interested in public appearances, Mme. Sand was flamboyant in her dress and defiantly independent. She certainly had no qualms about shocking society.10

In October of 1838, Chopin went with Mme. Sand along with her children, Maurice and Solange, to the island of Majorca. The couple was not well received by the
island's inhabitants. As a result, the Sands and Chopin were forced to relocate to an abandoned monastery at nearby Valldemosa. It was there that Chopin finished his Preludes, Op. 28, which were to become very important to my musical study later on.12

After their return to Paris, Chopin and Sand got apartments near to each other. For the next several years Chopin spent his summers in Paris teaching and his winters with Mme. Sand at her three-story manor house at Nohant. These were uneventful but happy and content years for the composer.13

I first met Chopin one warm July evening in 1833. On that particular evening, my father gave one of his soirées in our salon. Many of my parents' aristocratic and artistic friends were in attendance and among those was M. Chopin. I was naturally curious about this man; though relatively new to Paris, he had already acquired quite a bit of fame as a pianist. I was only six years of age at the time, so I was not allowed to join the party, but from just outside of my bedroom at the top of the stairs, I could unobtrusively see and hear much of what went on below. Chopin played numerous times during the evening, and I was as spellbound as everyone else present. His performance was breathtaking. It was polished and had great precision, but it was the way that he made the piano sing that really captivated us all. By the time he finished his last note, not a dry eye remained in the salon.

I was very intrigued. It was common knowledge that M. Chopin gave lessons, and from that evening in our salon, I wanted to be one of his students. Becoming such was easier said than done, however, as I was soon to find out. Chopin was much in demand as a teacher and so could afford to be selective.14 It was two weeks after our evening soirée that my mother and I approached him about lessons. He was very polite,
as usual; he was always a cultured gentleman in society. Nevertheless, he did turn down my request for lessons, saying I would be better served with another teacher. I was later to learn that Chopin never took on children or beginners.\(^{15}\) I was naturally disappointed, but undaunted. I took M. Chopin's advice and found someone different to guide my early musical development. I was determined that one day I would return to Chopin’s apartment with the same request. Only this time, he would accept me.

It was in the early spring of 1843 that I, now a 16-year-old young lady, decided to approach M. Chopin and once again ask him to take me on as his student. At first, I feared he would turn me down again, but instead he asked me to play something for him. Apparently my previous lessons had paid off, because after I had played, Chopin agreed to take me on as his student.

The next afternoon, I arrived at Chopin’s apartment for my first lesson. As was the case with many teachers of the time, Chopin gave each student a forty-five minute lesson every week, although at times lessons could be greatly extended.\(^{16}\) His fee was exorbitant. It was even greater for those students who insisted he visit them at their homes for their lessons.\(^{17}\) Chopin gave very definite instructions about practice. We were only to practice on the finest quality pianos, and we were not to exceed three hours of practice in a day. I must confess, practicing too much was never a fault of mine!\(^{18}\)

Chopin contained all the qualities that a good teacher should. He was patient and encouraging. He had a way of putting his students at ease from the very beginning. Of course, there were times when lessons were decidedly unpleasant. Chopin occasionally got very exasperated when his students were not prepared.\(^{19}\)
There was not a great deal of variety in the repertoire that I played in my years with Chopin. I played a number of his pieces including nocturnes, polonaises, scherzos, and especially preludes. I was never allowed to play his études, however. It was only his most advanced students who were allowed to play these, and I never ended up in this category. Beyond his own compositions, I, of course, studied the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Every one of his students studied Bach. One particular course of study that I undertook was that of the preludes and fugues in Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. This work contains two books, each containing a prelude and fugue in each of the twenty-four major and minor keys. The works that I learned were all from Book I. While working on these pieces, I naturally learned quite a bit about the genre of the prelude and its traditional function. Traditionally, the prelude was a short form in a somewhat improvisational manner. Bach’s preludes were used to introduce other pieces in the same key. They introduced their accompanying fugues. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is at least in part a didactic work. It teaches contrapuntal techniques, finger independence, and creating a layered texture out of a single voice. I will now play for you four of Bach’s preludes, with one of the fugues, which I learned during my study with Chopin.

[Note: at this point I played the set of Bach preludes before finishing the lecture.]

One thing I remember above all else in my lessons was Chopin’s insistence on getting a beautiful tone. He did not like heaviness in playing, and he also didn’t like showy displays of virtuosity. He was constantly asking me to relax and just play the
music. More than once he told me “il faut chanter avec les doigts,” or “it is necessary to
sing with the fingers.” In fact, according to Chopin, singing was one of the most
important methods of producing music. He felt that instrumentalists should model their
training on that of the voice. He loved Italian opera and the bel canto style of singing,
and he was constantly suggesting that his students attend the opera regularly.24

Chopin’s teaching was in many ways different from that of any other teacher I
had heard of. For one thing, while most teachers taught their students to treat their
fingers as if they were all the same, Chopin taught us to let each finger have its own
characteristic and independence.25

The first few lessons with Chopin were very tedious. Long hours were spent
merely working on getting the appropriate touch. He told me that I should let my fingers
sink into the keys until they seem to reach the depths of the keyboard. We worked for
what felt like hours on different attacks of the same key.26

After I had reasonably mastered the concept of a light, even touch, we moved on
to technical exercise. Chopin had a novel approach to these. Unlike some teachers,
Chopin believed that technical exercise was much more than an ends unto itself; it was a
way of freeing the hand to learn to play more beautifully. Chopin was constantly
admonishing me to concentrate as I was working through technical exercises.27 Also,
Chopin assigned various and assundry pieces for this purpose, my favorite of which being
one of his own nocturnes.28 Chopin also insisted that I spend quite some time every day
playing scales and arpeggios. These were to be played with rhythmic regularity and
evenness of touch.29
Aside from the Bach preludes, which I've already talked about, I studied Chopin’s own Preludes, Op. 28 in the most depth. In fact, it seems that Chopin was very much influenced by *The Well-Tempered Clavier* when he wrote his Preludes. He even brought Bach’s work with him to Majorca where he finished his own set. The first point of comparison between the preludes of Bach and of Chopin is their tonal organization. Each set contains a prelude in each of the major and minor keys, but the two sets are ordered slightly differently. Bach’s preludes and fugues are arranged in pairs of major and parallel minor keys, which ascend chromatically (C c, C# c#, etc). Chopin, by contrast, pairs major key and relative minor, then moves around the circle of fifths (C a, G e, etc.).

While Chopin certainly was motivated by Bach’s choice of ordering to come up with his own, he did in fact change the function of the prelude. Chopin’s Preludes were not introductions to anything. They were merely miniature pieces complete in themselves. Each Prelude contains its own mood and flavor. I played two short groupings of the Preludes. I ordered these sets in a way that I find very effective due to their wide range of moods and tempos.

The first thing Chopin had me do when beginning a piece of music was to analyze its formal structure but also to analyze the mood of the piece. While ensuring my understanding of the formal/technical aspects of the music I studied, he placed equal importance on my perception of the affective implications, encouraging my development of images and extra-musical analogies. I must admit, I found it much easier to develop those analogies than to do the more technical analysis.
My choice to open the first set is Prelude No. 1 in C Major. Marked agitato, this Prelude reminded me of the ebbing and flowing of waves on the ocean. Chopin accomplished this agitato by staggering the entrances of the two hands. He also put the melodic notes in unusual places—the second big beat of each measure.

After this agitation comes Prelude No. 3 in G Major. When playing this prelude, I visualized the busy tranquility of a babbling brook on a beautiful spring morning. Not only could I hear the constant motion of the brook in the left hand, but I also heard the chirping of the birds in the right hand melody. The surface activity in this Prelude brings the first Prelude to mind in a way, but the sense of agitation and urgency is completely absent. Harmonically, the piece is rather simple with only minor exceptions. This contributes to the feeling of ease and simplicity.

After G Major came Prelude No. 4 in E Minor. This Prelude seemed to me to represent regret. It seems to be a regret over a missed opportunity sometime in the past. This Prelude is certainly not harmonically simple. In fact, it is very difficult to analyze because the chords don’t seem to change as much as to just melt one into another, always sliding downward, adding to the feeling of regret.

After regret comes peaceful simplicity with the Prelude No. 7 in A Major. The image this prelude gave me was that of someone daydreaming. It is short and sweet and largely unruffled. Nearly everything about this Prelude is simple. The phrases, form, and harmony are very regular. It is this regularity that makes the one unexpected chord near the end, a secondary dominant on the second scale degree, effective. Soon we are back on track though, and the piece ends on a dominant-tonic progression.
The conclusion to the first set is Prelude No. 10 in C-sharp Minor. With its several brief polonaise-like measures, this Prelude is almost like the composer’s dream or memory of his homeland. Harmonically, this piece is also reasonably simple. The ornamental cascade of notes in the first two measures of each group contribute to the feeling of reminiscence in this Prelude.\(^{34}\) A surprise comes at the very end. The final polonaise section is interrupted by a lone A, accented and in octaves. It is as if the composer has suddenly gotten a warning or premonition of something to come, but rather than heeding this warning, he ignores it and moves on with his life.

I began my second set of Chopin preludes peacefully. Prelude No. 11 in B Major, is bright and cheerful. When I started work on this Prelude, I got the mental picture of a butterfly lazily flying on a sunny summer day. The near constant eighth-note motion in this Prelude reminds me of fluttering butterfly wings. The most note-worthy feature of this Prelude, in my opinion, is its texture. While only two lines are ultimately playing at the same time, a third line seems to emerge and create a melody.

After the beautiful sunny day, inevitably comes the thunderstorm. Because of the constant, gentle patter of the A-flat, Prelude No. 15 in D-flat Major is referred to as the "raindrop."\(^{35}\) Chopin, of course, did not instigate this name himself; he never used programmatic titles. The first section is the rather benign beginning of the storm. The rain has started, but it is only falling gently to the ground. When the piece suddenly changes to minor, the tone becomes much more ominous.\(^{36}\) It is as if the thunder and lightning have rolled in. As the piece begins to move back to D-flat major, the tension is slowly relieved until the opening melody ushers back in the benign rainstorm.
We move from a thunderstorm to a funeral procession in Prelude No. 20 in C Minor. This Prelude contains, in essence, two phrases. The first consists of a somber, lugubrious harmonic progression. This phrase, with its thick chords, loud dynamic levels, and constantly descending bass line, exudes the feeling of epic tragedy. The second phrase, which is repeated, changes mood slightly. A feeling of sadness still exists, but it is accompanied by resignation and quiet mourning. This is accomplished by a much softer dynamic level and thinner, more open chords.

The gloom of the C Minor Prelude is readily dispelled by the next Prelude, No. 23 in F Major. This Prelude painted for me a portrait of a perfect, sunny spring day. While a filmy, arpeggio accompaniment is played in the right hand; the left hand plays a melody full of trills, grace notes, and moving eighth and sixteenth notes. This pattern is repeated several times. A feeling of unrest and inquietude ensues in the final measure as an E-flat creeps into what would otherwise be a simple F chord. It is as if we realize that some indefinable element is slightly out of place. This is a foreshadowing of the prelude to come.

The final prelude that I played is also the final in the set. The Prelude No. 24 in D Minor clearly exudes a feeling of despair and desperation. The constantly repeating accompaniment pattern that is established in the very first measure is inexorable. It is relentless and the suffering of the person being described is never allowed to abate completely. The ever-present ornamental and fioratura passages in the right hand never seem to quite line up with the thundering accompaniment. This only lends an air of desperation. Finally, the motion ceases at the end with the knell of a funeral bell. Yet, somehow at the end of the prelude, I am left with a feeling of hope.
I studied with Chopin for three years. Somehow, I think I learned more about
music and about playing the piano in those three summers than I had learned in all my
previous years of study. After my lessons ended, I continued to follow Chopin’s life,
short though it was to be. In 1847, the romance between Chopin and George Sand came
to an end after nine years. The break seemed to be brought about as a result of family
problems involving Sand’s daughter, Solange, and her husband rather than through any
direct argument between Chopin and Sand. In April of 1848, Chopin went to London
where he gave a number of concerts. After several months away, Chopin returned to
Paris where his health failed miserably. In June, Chopin’s sister, Ludwika arrived and
she was with Chopin throughout his last days. Frédéric Chopin died of tuberculosis on
October 17, 1849. When Chopin died, the world lost a wonderful and talented
musician, but his music and his influence will remain for years to come.
Conclusion

I performed my lecture/recital on Saturday, February 16 at 5:30 p.m. I had approximately twenty people in attendance. I believe that the performance went rather well. Of course there were some small measures and sections in the music that I would have liked to have played a little better or at least differently than I did, but no performance can ever be perfect. I think that the lecture portion went well also. I think that I engaged with my audience and spoke with assurance and at least some animation.

After the performance, I began to think about the ways that I could use the knowledge that I gleaned through the development of this project. To my delight I was able to think of a number of such ways. First, I found that Chopin gave some very sound and interesting advice about how to teach piano, which I certainly plan to do in the future. Many of his methods could be used very easily today. In particular I was struck by his ideas about producing a beautiful sound and by his thoughts on the subject of performing technical exercises. Chopin asserted that students should not merely repeat technical exercises while in essence disengaging the brain from what is going on. He said that the pupil should be acutely attentive to each exercise. He or she should remain mentally involved to ingrain each new technique into the brain as well as into the fingers. This assertion seems to me to be merely common sense. After all, one does not learn technical skills just for the sake of learning them; one strives, through them, to facilitate the playing mechanism to serve the music. Despite this, more often than not, teachers still assign technical drills for their students to simply repeat mindlessly. I believe Chopin’s method to be much more useful to the students, and I will use it.
In addition, I think this lecture/recital could easily find a place in my curriculum when I am teaching in the schools. I hope to teach at the middle school level, so I will discuss ways that this project can be used and adapted for this level. I will be certified to teach either general music or choir. I believe this project, while not inappropriate in a choral class, is most useful in the general music classroom. Whatever area I might teach, I believe that I will have to make a few modifications to my lecture/recital before it will be acceptable for use in the middle school classroom. First of all, it would need to be shortened slightly. The majority of middle school class periods last approximately fifty minutes, and my project lasts approximately sixty. I would rather not carry the presentation over to a second day if at all possible. Second, while the content is not too complicated or sophisticated for a middle school class, I believe that it is presented in a way that would quickly lose my students’ attention and interest. I think that I could engage my students more if I were to add visual aids to my presentation. I could, for example show pictures of the people and places that I mention in the lecture. I could create visual listening maps for my students to follow while I am playing the pieces. I also think that it would behoove me to change the order of events somewhat. I think I would be more likely to maintain my students’ interest if I were to play each Prelude directly after I had spoken about it rather than speaking about the whole set and then playing them. Finally, I think that it is important to keep the students as actively involved in their learning as possible. For this reason, I might find a way to involve them in my lecture. I might, perhaps, ask guided questions about various parts of the lecture as I come to them. I would use these questions to attempt to make this topic as real and relevant to the students as possible. For example, when discussing biographical
information about Chopin, I could ask the students what was going on in our own country
during that time period. Also, when mentioning the political upheaval in Poland, I could
try to get my students to relate those events to events occurring today. When discussing
teaching strategies that Chopin used, I could ask the students how those strategies were
the same or different from strategies their former music teachers have used. The list of
possible correlations goes on and on. I believe a modified version of this lecture/recital
would make my middle school students understand and appreciate Chopin, the prelude,
the piano, and the Romantic period much more completely than would a textbook section
alone.

In conclusion, I am glad that I decided to give a lecture/recital and that I had this
experience. After having developed and performed this lecture/recital, I got a definite
feeling of accomplishment. In addition, I learned quite a bit about a composer whose
music I have always enjoyed. Finally, I have created a project that will be useful to me in
the future when I am teaching. I feel that I have grown quite a bit as both a teacher and
as a musician as a result of the work that I have done to produce this honors project.
Notes
1. Chopin’s first name was spelled “Fryderyc” during his early years in Poland. He changed it to the French spelling when he came to Paris. For the sake of simplicity in the lecture, I only used the French spelling and pronunciation.
4. Samson—Chopin, p. 73.
17. Holland, pp. 204 and 206.
24. Eigledinger, p. 15.
25. Eigledinger, p. 33.
27. Holland, p. 224.
32. Kresky, p.16.
34. Kresky, p. 53.
35. Kresky, p. 77.
36. Kresky, p. 78.
38. There is not a feeling of hope embedded in the actual music. The feeling of despair lasts until the final notes of the piece. While playing this prelude, however, I couldn’t help but ask myself “what happens next?”. I believe that at
the end of the prelude, the person has emotionally hit rock bottom. At that point, (s)he is at a crossroads. Either (s)he can give up the fight and remain in despair, or (s)he can move forward and begin to improve emotionally. I, and by extension, Genevieve, choose to take the optimistic view and see hope for the future.

Bibliography


Holland, Jean. *Chopin’s Teaching and His Students*. Ann Arbor, MI: Xerox University Microfilms, 1976.


Program

JENNIFER DUQUAINE
piano
in a
SENIOR HONORS RECITAL

Recollections of an Imagined Student of Frédéric Chopin:
His teaching as exemplified in his Preludes.

Twenty-four Preludes, Op. 28 ........................................................ Freédéric Chopin
I. C Major, Agitato (1810-1849)
III. G Major, Vivace
IV. E Minor, Largo
VII. A Major, Andantino
X. C-sharp Minor, Allegro molto

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I ................................... Johann Sebastian Bach
I. Prelude in C Major (1685-1750)
X. Prelude in E Minor
XV. Prelude in G Major
II. Prelude and Fugue in C Minor

Twenty-Four Preludes, Op. 28 .................................................... Freédéric Chopin
XV. D-flat Major, Sostenuto (1810-1849)
XI. B Major, Vivace
XX. C Minor, Largo
XXIII. F Major, Moderato
XXIV. D Minor, Allegro Appassionato

Jennifer Duquaine is a student of James Helton.

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program at Ball State University.

PRUIS HALL
Saturday, February 16, 2002
5:30 p.m.

Series LVI
Number 113

In keeping with copyright and artist agreements, use of recording and photographic devices is not permitted by other than approved personnel.
We request your cooperation.
For performance information, call the School of Music Concert HotLine: (765) 285-5878.