Daniel Grimwood

talks about

Chopin's Prélude No. 4

Chopin is the most idiomatic of the pianist-composers and indeed, for many, piano music *is* Chopin. It's certainly true that he didn't write any music that didn't involve the piano and his deep and rich understanding of the instrument is reflected in everything he wrote for it.

Chopin's music looks backwards, as well as forwards. His detailed study of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach is reflected in his exquisite understanding of counterpoint and his harmonic experiments point forward toward the Second Viennese School.

The effect that he had on the following generation of Romantic composers – most notably, Richard Wagner – is also important: we can look at certain passages in his music and you'll find similar passages in Wagner operas where he clearly took Chopin as his starting point.

The Chopin style is modelled closely on the style of John Field, the Irish composer who moved to Russia. Field's teachers, apart from his father and grandfather, were Italian. He developed a style of *bel canto* piano playing that Chopin was to take further. Many of the devices that he incorporates in his melodic piano writing are taken directly from the Italian school, which were then taken by a later generation of Italian composers and translated back into opera. There's quite an interesting cross-genre exchange.

Historical context

The preludes are among the unruliest and most radical of Chopin's creative children. We need to have some understanding about the historical perspective for this opus in general, and what 'preluding' meant to the Romantic generation. So let's look at some of the collections of preludes that closely predate Chopin's. Opus 300 by Czerny is *The School of Preluding*. This is a collection of suggested improvisations, because all pianists in that period were expected to improvise lead-ins before works. The first notated examples we have of this are, I think, the written-out improvisations that Mozart composed for his sister. There are the Hummel preludes in all 24 keys, many of them too short to be performable. Likewise, Henselt did the same thing. What Chopin created was a series of preludes which are in many respects tiny, in one or two respects really too tiny to stand up on their own; they need one or two of the neighbours. But they are nonetheless pieces which are not accompanying side-dishes but the thing in itself – no matter if they appear incomplete, the romantic fragment was very much a thing at that time. So one or two of the preludes like this one can operate as free-standing things but we have to understand them in relation to the rest of the opus, and in their historic context.

From what we know about Chopin's own playing, he played with very great freedom and was always tinkering with his scores and updating them

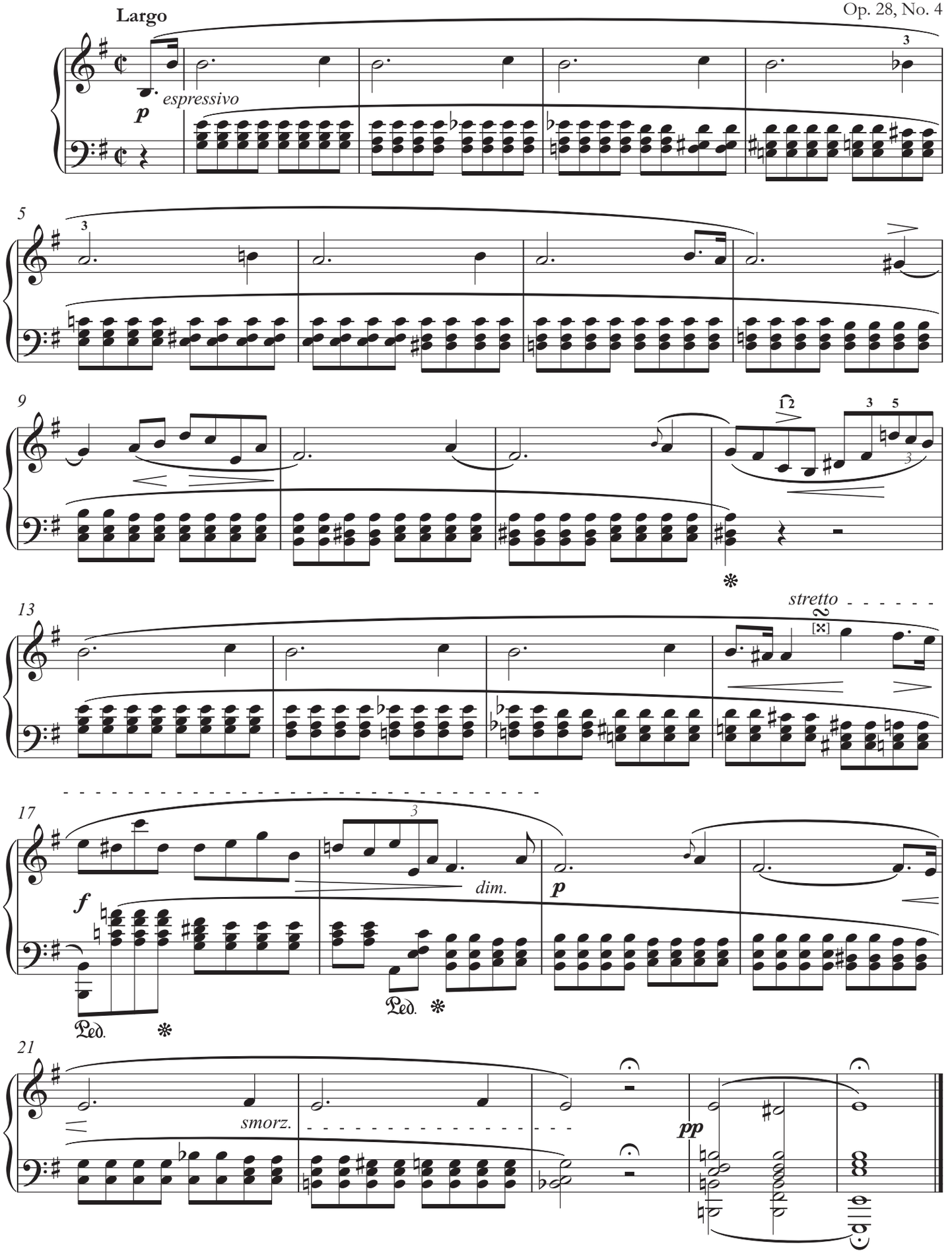
Tempo

The tempo of *Largo* should be understood as not to be played too slowly. After all, the time signature is *alla breve*, which means two beats in a bar, rather than four. Also the melody is made up of long

Prélude in E minor

from *24 Préludes*, Op. 28

Fryderyk Chopin (1810–1849)
Op. 28, No. 4



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