IMPROVISED PRELUDES IN THE 19TH CENTURY AS INFORMED BY THE GUITAR LITERATURE

By Neil Caulkins

> Mademoiselle [Reisz] played a soft interlude. It was an improvisation. She sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity. Gradually and imperceptibly the interlude melted into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin Impromptu.[1]

This depiction of an improvised prelude, albeit fictional, was written in the late 1800s. It illustrates the performance practice of improvising a prelude before performing a work. In a review of an 1842 concert in Frankfurt, music critic Carl Gollmick wrote that the pianist's

> performance recalls the golden age, in which Clementi, Mozart, Field, Klengel, Ries, Cramer, or Hummel was still in vogue; but he would have recalled that age even more had he also played a free fantasy, as those kings of the piano did. Unfortunately this most noble branch of piano playing, by which one used to recognize the true pianist, has been lost for the most part, for every thunder god or gymnast is now called master.[2]

After the 1830s, beginning a composition with an improvised prelude was the best way to recall performances of earlier in the century. Indeed, improvising preludes, as the above critic suggests, was the noblest branch of music making, emblematic of early 19th-century performance, and a skill distinguishing true masters of their instrument.

Period treatises and modern scholarship have shed considerable light on improvisational practice in the 1700s and earlier, and redefined how that music is now understood and played.[3] But relatively little attention has been directed to improvisation in the 19th century, which carried forward the earlier tradition. Improvising preludes, by soloists and ensembles, was commonplace through the first half of the 19th century. The practice went into decline beginning about 1830 and was all but eliminated by the turn of the 20th century. By looking at the source documents of the day (musical works, methods, treatises), one gets a sense of how these improvised preludes sounded, how they were constructed, and when they were employed.

Guitar texts offer a unique perspective on the practice. From 1760 to 1860 more methods were published for guitar than for any other instrument. One reason may have been that guitar was not a part of the conservatory system, so no standard conservatory-approved method for the instrument reigned supreme. Absent any one conservatory's monopoly, a market flourished as authors and publishers tried to supply instruction manuals for, what was in the early 19th century, a very popular instrument.[4] Similarly, while instruction in the art of improvisation (excepting certain treatises mentioned below) may have largely taken place within the guild-like conservatory system, conservatory-centered teaching for guitar was unavailable, requiring an abundance of methods to fill the void.

I. Improvised preludes and piano

Romantic composers Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827), Johann Hummel (1778–1837), Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47), Fanny Mendelssohn (1805–47), Robert Schumann (1810–56), Clara Schumann (1819–96), Franz Liszt (1811–86), Johannes Brahms (1833–97), and Frederic Chopin (1810–49), among others, were famous as improvisers. These master musicians cultivated their art at a time when the sharp distinction between composition and improvisation was only beginning to crystallize.[5] Tellingly, the word *improvisation*, as a noun, emerged in European languages only during the 19th century and appeared in verb form later yet, underscoring the perceived lack of separation between composed and impromptu artistry current in the

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1 Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899; repr., New York: Capricorn, 1964), 166.

2 Carl Gollmick, review of concert by Charles Hallé in Frankfurt, *Allgemiene Musikalische Zeitung*, September 21, 1842, 747.

3 E.g.: Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin: Johann Friedrich Voss, 1752); Robert Donington, *Baroque Music: Style and Performance: A Handbook* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982); Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J. S. Bach* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978); Grant Herreid, "'Skillful Singing' and the Prelude in Renaissance Italy," *Early Music America* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 25–29.

4 Erik Stenstadvold, *An Annotated Bibliography of Guitar Methods, 1760–1860* (New York: Pendragon, 2010), xi–xii.

5 Shane Levesque, "Functions and Performance Practice of Improvised Nineteenth-Century Piano Preludes," *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 13, no. 1 (2008): 109. Chopin's preludes are on a different magnitude than what is broadly considered an improvised prelude in the early 19th century—far more developed independent pieces. Hence, they fall outside the scope of this article.

musical culture.[6] Whether played from score or improvised, listeners and practitioners valued music as high expression.

A great deal of information regarding improvisation in this period appears in treatises for the pianoforte. Nineteenth-century piano treatises, such as those by Carl Czerny (1791–1857), Friedrich Kalkbrenner (1785–1849), and Philip Antony Corri (1784–1832), provide examples and instruction to performers as to how and when to improvise preludes. Czerny states that the improvised prelude is "a crown of distinction for a keyboardist, particularly in private circles at the performance of solo works, if he does not begin directly with the composition itself but…[with] a suitable prelude." Czerny believed a unique prelude should be improvised every time an appropriate solo or ensemble piece was played. Czerny wrote that works without written introductions, such as a variation set that began directly with the theme, were especially suitable for pairing with an improvised prelude. Performers in the early 19th century, notably Hummel and Beethoven, were known to prelude in a style contrasting with the piece being introduced.[7]

The improvised prelude was played before the written piece and nowhere notated. It served to sound out the hall, warm up fingers, calm nerves, establish the key of the coming piece, introduce a song without a composed introduction, create transitions between pieces, and enhance the performer's ability to communicate and spark audience receptivity. Improvised preludes were not founded upon figured bass but rather upon relatively simple harmonic progressions, often contained in the same treatise or method. Such improvisations may have been more prominent in private settings but occurred in public concerts too.[8]

Corri stated, "In the performance of preludes, all formality or precision of time must be avoided: they must *appear* to be the birth of the moment, the effusion of the fancy: for this reason it may be observed, that the measure or time is not always marked at preludes" [italics original]. Some improvised preludes were written out, lacked bar lines and time signatures, and displayed contrasts of every sort. Some were entirely or partially unmeasured, often marked *ad libitum*. Preludes could end in unmeasured cadenzas. Hence, timing of notes was intentionally ambiguous, notated rhythms serving merely as guidelines, and repetition of figures, in practice, could have been more frequent, or at least different, than notated. Corri described the improvised prelude as "bold and energetic" with the linear passages executed brilliantly and the chords long and rolled, all of which contributed to ambiguity of pulse. Written-out introductions could serve as starting points for further improvisation, development, and exploration.[9]

Collections of preludes served as models for the student and consisted of two or three lines of music in each key, or perhaps the most frequently used keys. Although improvised preludes in published collections more often than not began and ended on tonic, Czerny advocated that they end on dominant. In ensemble music, Czerny cautioned that improvised preludes be short and limited to "a few chords and a brilliant run." Improvised preludes could venture into different keys for a very short time. Examples of written-out improvised preludes exemplified extreme contrasts in rhythm and dynamics so as to appear spontaneous. These contrasts and modulations created pieces "seemingly without a conscious plan, resembling wanderings into unknown regions."[10] This writing out of improvised preludes for student use, either verbatim or as models for their own improvised efforts, was probably, at least partially, done out of the emerging desire for composers to exert more control over their work.[11]

II. Shift away from improvisation

Improvised preludes eventually fell out of favor. The movement toward reification of the musical score and eradication of improvisation from the classical music stage was underway by the 1830s. In that decade both the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and *Revue et gazette musicale* denigrated the virtuosic and improvisatory styles of music making and instead lauded the performance of fully composed

6 Bruno Nettl and Melinda Russell, *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 36.

7 Levesque, 109; Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, Op. 200 [1829], trans. and ed. by Alice L. Mitchell (New York: Longman, 1983), 6, 15–17, German original at books.google.com/books?id=ymVcAAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false; Marion P. Barnum, "A Comprehensive Performance Project in Piano Literature and an Essay on J. N. Hummel and His Treatise on Piano Playing" (DMA diss., Univ. of Iowa, 1971), 126.

8 Valerie Woodring Goertzen, "By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th- and Early 19th-Century Pianists," *Journal of Musicology* 14, no. 3 (1996): 299, 303; Czerny, 6; Goertzen, 307–09.

9 Philip Anthony Corri, *Original System of Preluding Comprehending Instructions on that branch of Piano Forte Playing* (London: Chappell, 1810), 1–4, 10–34, www.scribd.com/document/392532142/Corri-Philip-Anthony-Original-System-of-Preluding; Levesque, 110, 114; Goertzen, 323, 325.

10 Goertzen, 313–314; Czerny, 17–20; Corri, 2, 3, 10–34; quote in Czerny, 23.

11 Goertzen, 326. Providing prelude models for students was a central feature of three major treatises: Corri and Czerny, op. cit, and Friedrich Kalkbrenner, *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste: Principes rationnels*, Op. 185 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1849), digital-beta.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN629823820&PHYSID=PHYS_0001&DMDID=.

and notated works such as those by recently deceased (famous improviser) Beethoven. Toward the end of his life, even the great extemporizer Schumann, when referring to improvisation, said "beware of giving yourself up, too often, to a talent that will lead to [wasting] strength and time on shadow pictures."[12] As stated, this campaign was ultimately successful.

Veteran improvisers did not appreciate this shift in taste. As a result of the decline, Czerny bemoaned pianists that played the same prelude over and over. Friedrich Kalkbrenner lamented, "How many of our best pianists can make an even moderately satisfying prelude? And as for students there is not more than one in a thousand who try to go beyond the perfect cadence in improvisations."[13]

III. Improvised preludes and guitar

Guitar scores and methods from the early 19th century contain many written-out examples of preludes otherwise improvised. They reflect the period's overall approach to preluding in (1) their length; (2) contrasts—often drastic—in tempo, range, and dynamics; (3) emphasis on idiomatic keys; and (4) range of metrical treatment, from measured to unmeasured. However, even preludes restricted by bar lines often employ fingering or fermatas in such a way as to eschew a sense of pulse. As in general practice, many are marked *ad libitum*.

Methods

As guitar methods taught students to improvise their own preludes, they supplied examples to memorize and emulate along with instruction in chord progressions and modulation. In his *Escuela de Guitarra* of 1825, Dionisio Aguado (1784–1849) reflects common performance practice as he emphasizes commonality of key between prelude and follow-up piece, and explains that in notated examples durational values merely indicate how fast, more or less, the notes are to move. In François de Fossa's (1775–1849) French edition of Aguado's method, he (probably de Fossa, not Aguado) describes preluding as (1) performing a series of chords, either simultaneously or as arpeggios; (2) interposing something between chords to connect them, with or without bass; and (3) navigating a melody through closely related tonalities while repeating it in the same voice as well as passing it between treble and bass in dialog.[14] Aguado's examples are all unmeasured and begin and end in the tonic key.

Mauro Giuliani's (1781–1829) *Etudes*, Op. 100, contain eight examples of preludes (nos. 17–24) "to be used before you play a piece of music," half of them unmeasured. They too begin and end on tonic. In *Grammatica per Chitarra francese*, Giuseppe Boccomini (fl. 1820) presents eight instructional preludes, in "the most useful keys," which formulaically establish tonality through chords, a scale, and a tonic arpeggio (**Figure 1**). Additionally, Boccomini's method

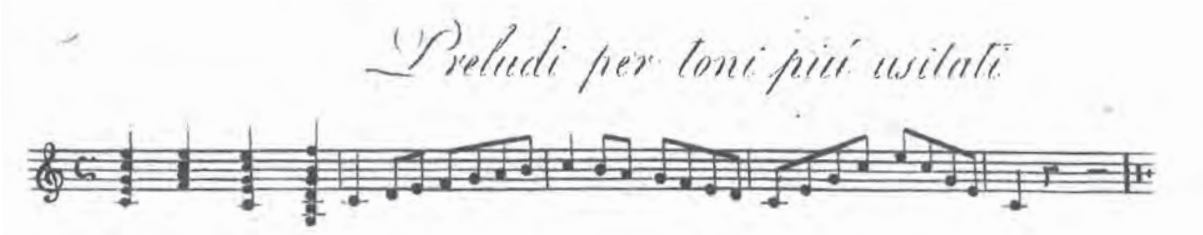

Figure 1: Prelude from Giuseppe Boccomini's *Grammatica per Chitarra francese*, illustrating a chord progression, scale, and tonic arpeggio in C major.

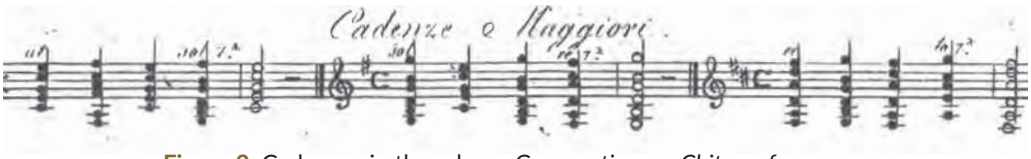

Figure 2: Cadences in three keys, *Grammatica per Chitarra francese*.

[12] Dana A. Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 13; Robert Schumann and Fanny Raymond Ritter, *Music and Musicians: Essays and Criticisms*, 1st ser., 8th ed. (London: W. Reeves, 1877), 417.

[13] Czerny, 6, 16; Kalkbrenner, 1.

[14] Dionisio Aguado, *Escuela de Guitarra* (Madrid: D. Aguado, 1825), 89, www.chitarrafingerstyle.it/files/Dionisio-Aguado---Escuela-de-guitarra.pdf; and *Méthode complète pour la guitar*, F. de Fossa, trans. (Paris: Richault, 1826), 150, www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RIBS0016-2.pdf.

lays the standard preparatory groundwork for the novice preluder by offering for study a series of chord progressions, or cadences, in major and minor keys (**Figure 2**).[15]

The preludes of Franz Bathioli (?–1830) are among the most distinctive. In Book IV of his four-volume *Gemeinnützige Guitareschule*, beginning at page 19, the author presents seven preludes. Four are unmeasured (A minor, E minor, D major, D minor), but even in his measured examples, like the *Prelude* No. 5 in C major (**Figure 3**), fingerings deliberately obscure the pulse as slurs and string crossings straddle beats. This is especially apparent when we compare treatment of this prelude's opening scale to the same scale presented earlier in the book (**Figure 4**), where fingerings reinforce the underlying rhythm. Overall, Bathioli's C-major prelude conforms to the general description of the genre—a few lines in length, centered on dominant and tonic harmonies—yet manages to explore other harmonic colors: chords superimposed over an ascending chromatic bass line in bars 7–9 and a dominant harmony in bar 3 recast more chromatically in bar 5. In Book III, exposition of chord progressions in various major and minor keys is extensive (pages 14–25, **Figure 5**, next page).[16]

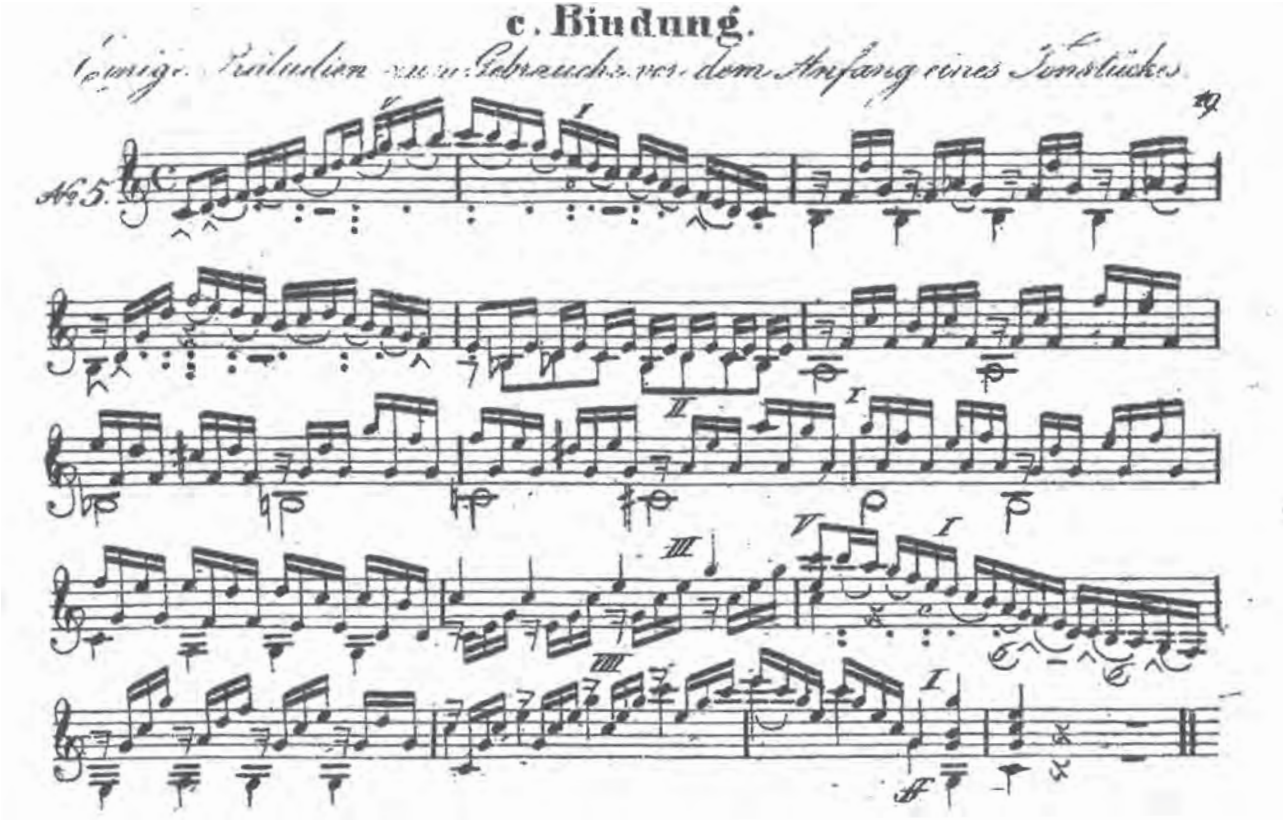

Figure 3: Prelude No. 5 in C major from Franz Bathioli's *Gemeinnützige Guitareschule*, Book IV, p. 19.

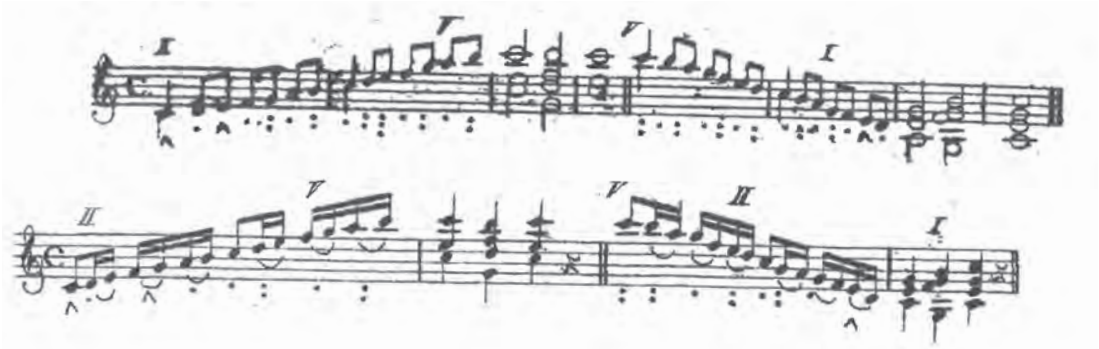

Figure 4: C-major scales and cadences, *Gemeinnützige Guitareschule*, Book IV, pp. 2, 5.

[15] Mauro Giuliani, *Etudes Instructives faciles et agréables*, Op. 100 (Vienna: A. Diabelli, [1819]), www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RiBS0344.pdf; Giuseppe Alfredo Boccomini, *Grammatica Per Chitarra Francese* (Rome: P. Piale & G. C. Martorelli, 1812).

[16] Franz Bathioli, *Gemeinnützige Guitareschule* (Vienna: A. Diabelli, [1825]), www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RIBS0028-4.pdf, www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RIBS0028-3.pdf.

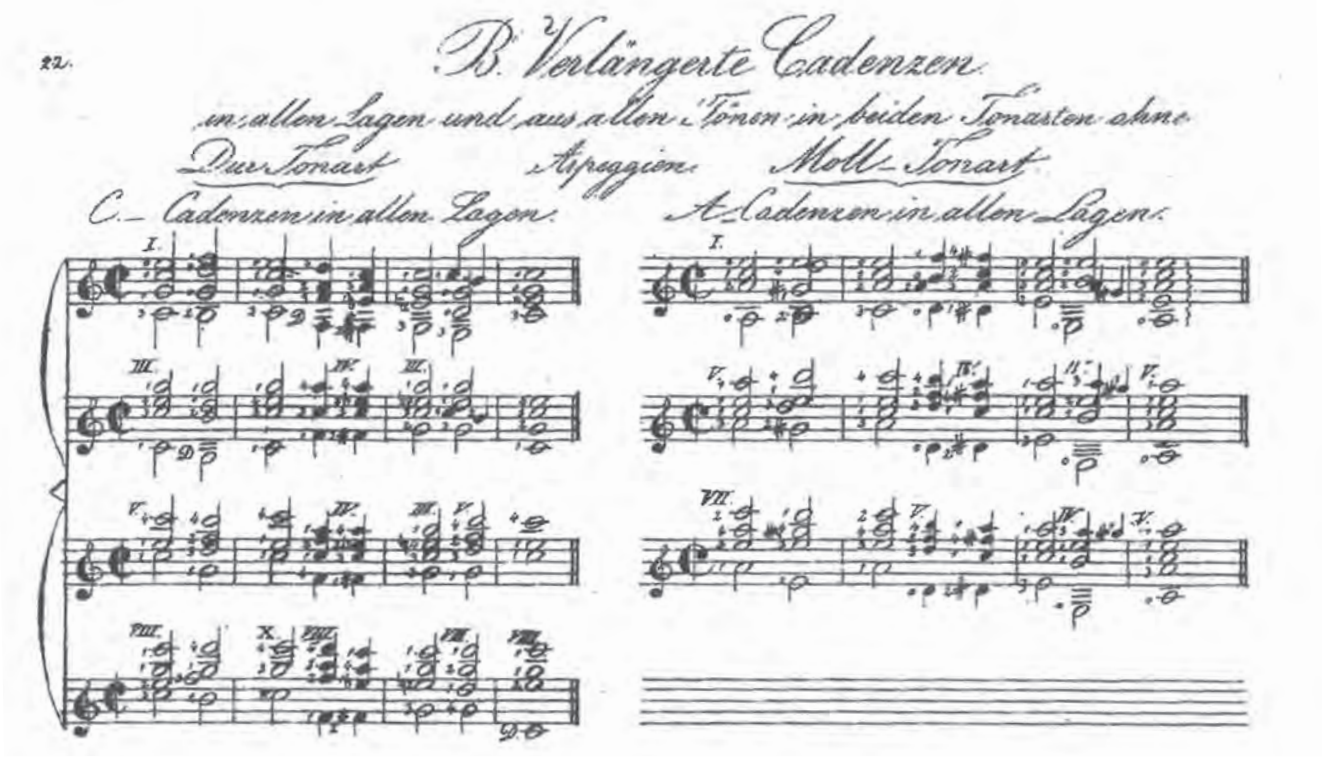

Figure 5: Two C-major chord progressions in various voicings, *Gemeinnützige Guitareschule*, Book III, p. 22.

Coste's revised edition of the Sor *Méthode* contains two pieces that display typical characteristics of improvised preludes: a twenty-measure Introduction (page 31, **Figure 6**) that segues without break into a longer etude, and a nineteen-measure Andante (pages 49–50) that segues into a march. Introduction and Andante simply set forth their respective tonalities in partially measured meter and both contain a cadenza. Each cadenza, along with its preparatory fermata, undermines a sense of thoroughgoing pulse. Both movements modestly flirt with other keys in their middle portions.[17]

Repertoire

A variety of examples exist of written-out improvised preludes from the guitar's early 19th-century solo and chamber music repertoire. The preludes of *Grand Recueil* by Ferdinando Carulli (1770–1841) appear in various keys, all marked *ad libitum*. In contrast, the six preludes (Op. 48/49) of Napoléon Coste (1805–83) are all measured, with only the last marked *ad libitum*. The preludes by Felix Horetzky (1796–1870), Op. 21, are all measured with no *ad libitum*.[18]

Introductions to many extended solo works, like *Fantaisie*, Op. 1, of Marco Aurelio Zani de Ferranti (1801–78), are clearly improvised preludes as well, set in score. Contrasts of range, tempo, and volume occurring in textures of fast runs, broken chords, and numerous fermatas are typical of this sort of prelude.[19] As is typical, rhythmic contrasts elicit a nonmetrical feel. The introduction to *Fantasie*, Op. 22, a duet for guitar and terz guitar by Pietro Pettoletti (1795–1870), closely reflects Czerny's earlier cited precept that improvised chamber-music preludes be short and feature merely a few chords and a brilliant run. In Pettoletti's introduction, the guitar plays a simple accompaniment, largely in half notes, while the terz guitar executes a couple of quicker runs, including a solo cadenza at the end. This improvisatory section ends on dominant, as advised by Hummel and Czerny, and serves as prelude to a theme and variation.[20] *Serenade for Flute and Guitar* by Charles Blum

17 Napoléon Coste, ed., *Méthode Complète pour la guitare par Ferdinand Sor* (Paris: G. Schonenberger, [1851]), www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RiBS0789.pdf.

18 Ferdinando Carulli, *Grand Recueil pour la Guitare* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, n.d.), www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RiBS0932.pdf; Napoléon Coste, *Quatre Marches et Six Préludes*, Op. 48 & 49 (Paris: L'auteur, 1878), www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RiBS0170.pdf; Felix Horetzky, *Preludes, Cadences, and Modulations*, Op. 21 (London: Metzler & Son, [c.1830]), dokumen.tips/documents/horetzky-preludes-cadences-modulations.html.

19 Marco Aurelio Zani de Ferranti, *Fantaisie variée sur l'air "Wan I in der Früh auf steh"*, Op. 1 (Bruxelles: B. Schott, 1843), digital-collections.csun.edu/digital/collection/IGRA-scores/id/397/rec/18, reissued in Simon Wynberg, ed., *The Guitar Works of Marco Aurelio Zani de Ferranti*, 14 vols. (Heidelberg: Chanterelle, 1989), III; Goertzen, 323.

20 Pietro Pettoletti, *Fantasie*, Op. 22 (St. Petersburg: M. Bernard, n.d.), handwritten manuscript viewable at www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/92030/MUS01000204702.html.

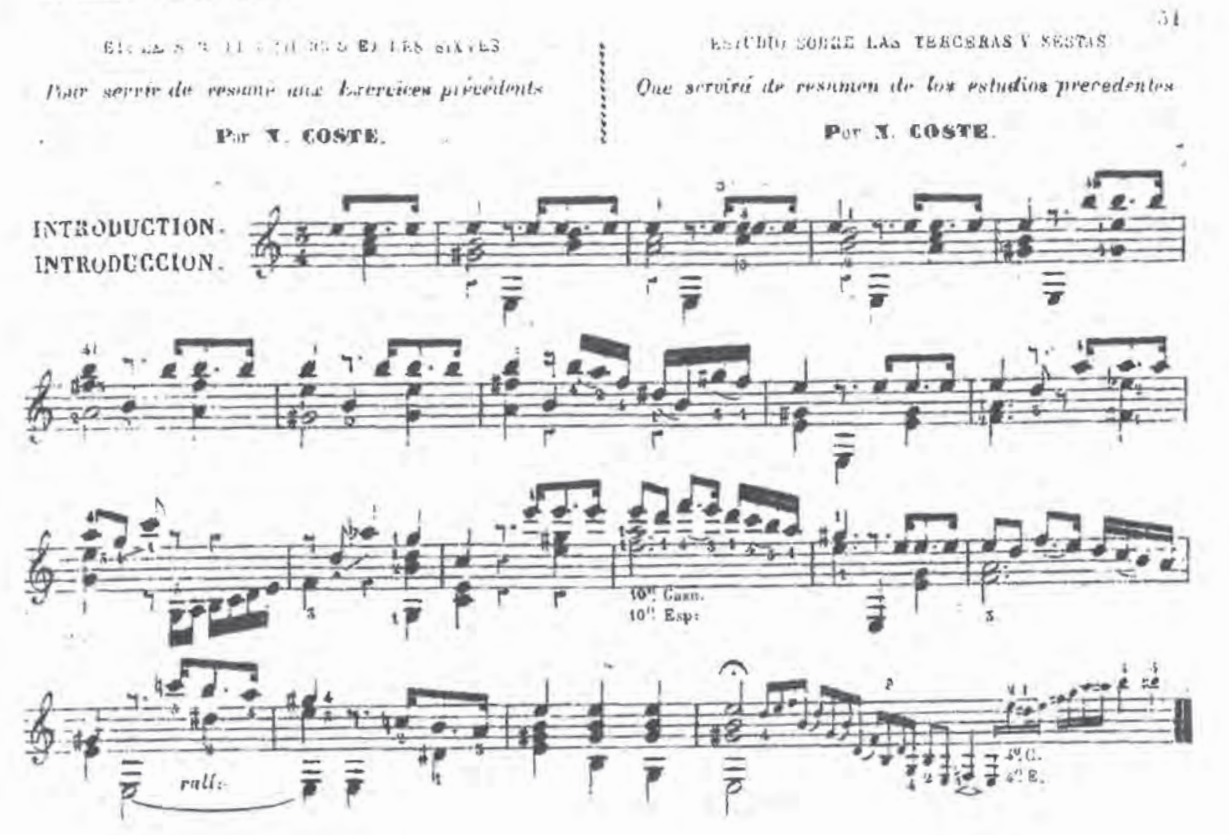

Figure 6: Introduction in A minor from the Coste-Sor *Méthode*, p. 31.

(1786–1844) also reflects Czerny's precepts. The opening Andante passes fast runs between guitar and flute, with the guitar often playing single chords as accompaniment. Contrasts in velocity again give the opening half of this section a sense of pulselessness. This Andante also ends on the dominant.[21]

IV. Conclusion

Inquiry into its literature reveals that the newly emergent six-string guitar partook of the practice of improvised preluding common in early 19th-century European music making, providing another piece of evidence that the instrument was not an outlier, somehow separate from cultured music, but shared in the musical mainstream. Guitar tutors and compositions from the period consistently comport with descriptions of improvised preludes found elsewhere in the musical literature. They also provide ample instruction in the creation of such pieces, a requisite resource for modern players who wish to recreate the performance practice of that time. And so I end with Hummel's axiom regarding the effort necessary to master the improvised prelude: "Time, patience, and industry lead to the desired goal."[22]

Neil Caulkins holds a master's degree in music and performs duets with his wife, Dr. Tamara Caulkins, on period instruments. Their playing has been described as "altogether exciting!" (*Fanfare*, New Jersey), their first recording as "a striking debut album" (*Guitar Review*, New York), and their duo as "a well-matched team" (*Guitar International*, Wiltshire, England). They have performed in the US, Canada, Spain, and Hong Kong. Mr. Caulkins' scholarly articles have been published in the US, UK, Japan, and Germany. Visit caulkinsguitarduo.com.

[21] Charles Blum, *Serenade pour Flûte et Guittar* (Vienna: Pietro Mechetti, [1821]), www2.kb.dk/elib/noder/rischel/RIBS0036.pdf. F. Bathioli's *Grandes Variations Concertantes pour Flute et Guitarre* (Vienna: A. Diabelli, [c.1823]) (archives.guitarfoundation.org/scores/X0292/grandes_variations.pdf) contains an introduction—perhaps a written-out improvised prelude—ending on dominant, though the following theme and variation also starts on dominant.

[22] Quoted in Barnum, 126.