

PIANO PRELUDES

GERSHWIN
GINASTERA
CHOPIN

MO XU



© **DUX RECORDING PRODUCERS, DUX 2143**, 2025

RECORDED AT THE DIMENNA CENTER FOR CLASSICAL MUSIC IN NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 1 & 2, 2023

SHAO TING SUN, LESZEK MARIA WÓJCIK RECORDING SUPERVISION & SOUND ENGINEERING

RAFAŁ DYMERSEKI GRAPHIC DESIGN AND PAGE LAYOUT

MARCIN TARGOŃSKI EDITOR



DUX RECORDING PRODUCERS

2 MORSKIE OKO STREET, 02-511 WARSAW, POLAND | WWW.DUX.PL, E-MAIL: DUX@DUX.PL

PIANO PRELUDES

GERSHWIN

GINASTERA

CHOPIN

MO XU

Pianist Mo Xu makes her recording debut on this disc – and what could be more appropriate for a first outing than a collection of preludes?

The term *prelude* – in the sense of a piece that introduces something else – has been in use since the 16th century, when it was often used to designate pieces that sound improvisatory in nature. Baroque master Johann Sebastian Bach famously wrote not one but two sets of pieces designated the *Well-Tempered Clavier*: each collection containing 24 preludes and fugues in all 24 Major and minor keys.

However, it seems to have been Chopin who freed the prelude from its introductory meaning: though there is some disagreement on this, his amazing Op. 28 preludes are not introductions to anything, but rather individual explorations of emotional states (Chopin was not actually the first to write independent preludes, he was merely the best!).

This disk concludes with a complete performance of all 24 of Chopin's Op. 28 *Preludes*. Xu opens with the *Three Preludes* by George Gershwin, jazzy works that give a sense of Gershwin's improvisational style. She then plays the twelve *American Preludes* by Ginastera: truly challenging works that channel both influences from Ginastera's native Argentina and a whole range of other modernist idioms.

George Gershwin (1898-1937) *Three Preludes*

In the mid-1920s, classical music (or what he referred to as “serious” music) was very much on George Gershwin's mind. He was already one of the most successful composers on Broadway when his *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered in 1924, a groundbreaking fusion of jazz and Classical styles. He followed up with two equally successful orchestral pieces, the *Concerto in F* (1925) and *An American in Paris* (1928). While on an extended visit to Paris, he tried to get composition lessons from Nadia Boulanger, Igor Stravinsky, and Maurice Ravel. All of them turned him down, with Ravel reportedly asking: “Why become a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?” He was also a powerful and imaginative pianist: Gershwin was notorious for making a beeline to the piano at any party he went to, and monopolizing the instrument for the rest of the night.

Gershwin also tackled smaller classical forms in the 1920s: in 1925, he wrote several piano preludes. He had originally planned to do a set of 24, in the mold of Chopin, but the always overcommitted Gershwin was able to finish only seven of them, playing five of these at a recital at New York's Hotel Roosevelt on December 4, 1925. In the end, he published three of the preludes as a set in 1926. Gershwin's *Three Preludes* are widely performed as solo piano works today. All of them have

Gershwin's trademark jazz style: a taste of those long evenings spent improvising for friends,

The basis of *Prelude No. 1* is a bluesy pair of motives stated at the beginning, and developed into a theme above a repeating Brazilian rhythm in the left hand. There is a briefly-stated contrasting idea before the main theme returns forcefully, leading to a final flourish and a crashing chord. *No. 2* sings the blues, with a laid-back theme for the right hand, with a soulful left-hand idea inserted for contrast in the middle of the piece. *No. 3* begins with a short and frantic introduction before the appearance of the main idea, a syncopated melody with a distinct hint of "stride piano" style. For contrast, there is a short Latin-style episode in the middle.

Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983) *Twelve American Preludes*

Alberto Ginastera was among Argentina's most important 20th-century composers, and certainly the first Argentinian whose music was widely known outside of his homeland. He was born in Buenos Aires to parents who immigrated from Catalonia and Italy, and trained at the conservatory there. After the second world war, Ginastera – who had been fired from a teaching position after indirectly protesting the Perón regime – spent two years in the United States, where he worked closely

with Aaron Copland. On returning to Argentina in 1947, he spent most of the next two decades as a teacher, becoming a primary influence on the next generation of young Argentinian composers. In 1968, during a period of family troubles and increasing political tension in Argentina, he left again for the United States, and by 1971 had settled in Switzerland, where he spent the rest of his life, devoting himself entirely to composition. Ginastera's style developed considerably over the course of his long career, but much of his music, particularly his early works, is tied closely to the culture and sound of his homeland.

In 1944, he completed his *Twelve American Preludes*, written for the Argentinian pianist Raúl Spivak. These are tightly-disciplined and concentrated little works exploring various compositional textures, or paying tribute to other musicians whom Ginastera admired. The set opens with *Triste* (*Sadness*), which projects a queuing quality in its open harmonies. He follows this with the fierce cross-rhythms (3/8 vs. 3/4) of *Para los acentos* (*Accents*), a piece lasting under half a minute. The *Danza criolla* (*Creole Dance*) also has a ferocious character, now pitting 6/8 against 3/4: hearing back to *Malambo* finale of his 1942 ballet *Estancia*. The title of *Vidala* refers to a traditional Argentinian song form, here played out in sharply dissonant harmony. *En el primer modo pentáfono menor* (*In the First Pentatonic Minor Mode*) is limpid and calm. The aggressive texture of *Homenaje*

a Roberto García Morillo (Tribute to Roberto García Morillo) pays tribute to one of Ginastera's Argentinian colleagues, who was a prominent composer and music critic.

Like *Para los acentos, Para las octavas* (Octaves) is a concise and belligerent piece, with left and right hands pounding out a jagged melody in octaves throughout. Ginastera marked the *Homenaje a Juan José Castro* (Tribute to Juan José Castro) *tempo di tango*, a surprisingly rare reference to Argentina's national dance in his works. This wistful piece honors another composer, and one of Argentina's first conductors to have a truly international career. The tense *Homenaje a Aaron Copland* (Aaron Copland) seems to refer to some of the more acerbic parts of Copland's 1941 *Piano Sonata. Pastoral* (Pastorale) combines two distinct tonalities as a simple two-chord ostinato carries throughout. The virtuosic *Homenaje a Heitor Villa-Lobos* (Tribute to Heitor Villa-Lobos), for Ginastera's great Brazilian contemporary, is among the more challenging pieces in the set for the pianist. Marked *violento*, this is a piece of perpetual motion, with an insistent melody played in octaves. The set ends with the calm, chordal *En el primer modo pentáfono mayor* (In the First Pentatonic Major Mode), which moves gradually towards an impassioned conclusion.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849) *Preludes, Op.28, Nos.1-24*

The Polish virtuoso Frédéric Chopin enjoyed some early success in his homeland before embarking on a European tour at age 20. He was prevented from returning to Poland when the Russians crushed the Polish rebellion of 1830-31, and he would never return, eventually settling in Paris, where he spent the rest of his life (though he became a French citizen, it is clear that Chopin always remained Polish at heart). Unlike many virtuosos of the 19th century, who maintained grueling tour schedules, Chopin performed only a few times each year, usually in the intimate setting of Parisian *salons* and invitation-only gatherings in his own apartment—venues perfectly suited to his often introspective and subtle piano works. He instead made his living publishing his works and teaching piano students.

Chopin's *Preludes*, Op. 28 were written in 1835–39, and were commissioned by the piano maker and musical entrepreneur Camille Pleyel. While most of them were written in Paris, at least some of them were written in Majorca, where he retreated with his partner George Sand and her children in the winter of 1838–39. Chopin certainly idolized the Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which seems to have been one of the main inspirations for this collection: like Bach, he provides works in all 24 major and minor keys, though in his case they are organized according to the “circle of fifths” – Nos. 1–14

climbing up through the sharp keys, and numbers 15 to 20 climbing back down through the flats.

These are among Chopin's finest mature works, and display a great range of emotion and pianistic technique. In most cases they are set in a single, highly-focused section, though some are expanded into a three-part ABA form, with a contrasting middle episode. Though it is not clear whether or not Chopin intended them to be played in one sitting, it has become fairly common since the early 20th century to present Op. 28 as a set: and it is certainly satisfying to hear them played together.

There is no overall emotional program, as Chopin explores a series of different feelings: passing, for example, directly from the dirgelike *No. 4 in E minor* (which was, in fact, played at Chopin's funeral) to the flitting exuberance of *No. 5 in D major*; or from

the gentle, almost hesitant mazurka style of *No. 7 in A major* to the agitated *No. 8 in F-sharp minor*. Perhaps the most jarring transition is from the fiery virtuosity of *No. 16 in B-flat minor* to the calm simplicity that opens *No. 17 in A-flat major*. There are also startling harmonic experiments, as in the left hand in *No. 2 in A minor*, or the intensely chromatic melody of *No. 12 in G-sharp minor*. Chopin also avoided giving any emotional "spoilers" by titling them, though *No. 15 in D-flat major* is often known as the "*Raindrop*" *Prelude*. The set comes to a satisfying conclusion with *No. 24 in D minor*: a constantly questing main theme, elaborately decorated throughout, comes to an end with three solemn low Ds.

©2024 J. Michael Allsen



Mo Xu, a passionate and dedicated classical pianist, was previously a recording engineer during her undergraduate years. She worked as a sound engineer assistant at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games softball stadium, as well as at several other professional sporting events. During her studies, she had many opportunities to record various types of music, both live and in the studio. A pivotal experience in Mo's life came one night when she recorded a classical piano recital at the China Conservatory of Music – an event that led her to realize she had discovered her true calling: to become a professional classical pianist.

Pursuing her dream, Mo switched her major to piano performance when she moved to the United States in 2010. Since then, she has performed at many prestigious venues, including Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Bezanson Recital Hall, Kemp Recital Hall, the ISU Center for the Performing Arts, and Sweeney Concert Hall. Mo is committed to bringing classical music to her local community and engaging in dialogue with general audiences. She has performed at Westminster Village, University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, Oaknoll Retirement Community, and Lathrop Retirement Community.

In addition to her longstanding appreciation for the standard repertoire, Mo has a particular interest in 20th-century and contemporary music. She has performed many atonal works from memory, including Arnold Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke*,

Op. 11, and Wladimir Vogel's *Epitaffio per Alban Berg*. She played in the world premieres of David Maslanka's *Symphony No. 9* and Carl Schimmel's *Oulipian Episodes*. She also collaborates year-round with other instrumentalists on contemporary chamber works, including compositions by Andrea Clearfield, Libby Larsen, and David Canfield.

Mo received second prize at the American Protégé International Concerto Competition, second prize at the "Golden Classical Music Awards" International Competition, and honorable mentions at both the Bradshaw & Buono International Piano Competition and the Paderewski International Piano Competition in Connecticut.

Originally from Changchun, China, Mo is a graduate of the Communication University of China, where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Recording Arts. She received her Master of Music degree in piano performance from Illinois State University, where she studied with Dr. Carlyn Morenus, and her Doctor of Musical Arts degree in piano performance and pedagogy from the University of Iowa, where she studied with Dr. Uriel Tsachor.

PIANO PRELUDES

GERSHWIN GINASTERA CHOPIN

George GERSHWIN (1898–1937)

Three Preludes (1926)

- | | | |
|---|---|------|
| ① | Prelude No. 1 in B-flat major – Allegro ben ritmato e deciso | 1:43 |
| ② | Prelude No. 2 in C-sharp minor – Andante con moto e poco rubato | 3:24 |
| ③ | Prelude No. 3 in E-flat minor – Allegro ben ritmato e deciso | 1:14 |

Alberto GINASTERA (1916–1983)

Doce Preludios Americanos, Op. 12 (1944)

- | | | |
|---|---|------|
| ④ | Preludio No. 1 – Triste | 0:59 |
| ⑤ | Preludio No. 2 – Para los acentos | 0:31 |
| ⑥ | Preludio No. 3 – Danza criolla | 1:23 |
| ⑦ | Preludio No. 4 – Vidala | 0:57 |
| ⑧ | Preludio No. 5 – En el primer modo pentáfono menor | 1:23 |
| ⑨ | Preludio No. 6 – Homenaje a Roberto García Morillo | 0:54 |
| ⑩ | Preludio No. 7 – Para las octavas | 0:41 |
| ⑪ | Preludio No. 8 – Homenaje a Juan José Castro | 0:49 |
| ⑫ | Preludio No. 9 – Homenaje a Aaron Copland | 1:06 |
| ⑬ | Preludio No. 10 – Pastoral | 2:04 |
| ⑭ | Preludio No. 11 – Homenaje a Heitor Villa-Lobos | 0:58 |
| ⑮ | Preludio No. 12 – En el primer modo pentáfono mayor | 2:16 |

Fryderyk CHOPIN (1810–1849)

Preludes, Op. 28 (1835–1839)

16	Prelude No. 1 in C major – Agitato	0:32
17	Prelude No. 2 in A minor – Lento	2:00
18	Prelude No. 3 in G major – Vivace	1:05
19	Prelude No. 4 in E minor – Largo	1:51
20	Prelude No. 5 in D major – Allegro molto	0:46
21	Prelude No. 6 in B minor – Lento assai	1:44
22	Prelude No. 7 in A major – Andantino	0:36
23	Prelude No. 8 in F-sharp minor – Molto agitato	2:10
24	Prelude No. 9 in E major – Largo	1:34
25	Prelude No. 10 in C-sharp minor – Allegro molto	0:33
26	Prelude No. 11 in B major – Vivace	0:32
27	Prelude No. 12 in G-sharp minor – Presto	1:21
28	Prelude No. 13 in F-sharp major – Lento	2:46
29	Prelude No. 14 in E-flat minor – Allegro	0:33
30	Prelude No. 15 in D-flat major – Sostenuto (“Raindrop”)	4:10
31	Prelude No. 16 in B-flat minor – Presto con fuoco	1:24
32	Prelude No. 17 in A-flat major – Allegretto	3:04
33	Prelude No. 18 in F minor – Allegro molto	1:02
34	Prelude No. 19 in E-flat major – Vivace	1:46
35	Prelude No. 20 in C minor – Largo	1:42
36	Prelude No. 21 in B-flat major – Cantabile	1:43
37	Prelude No. 22 in G minor – Molto agitato	0:50
38	Prelude No. 23 in F major – Moderato	1:02
39	Prelude No. 24 in D minor – Allegro appassionato	2:29

Total time: 57:44

