

FRANCIS ROUTH

The Well-Tempered Pianist

24 Preludes for Piano, Op.77

I	C	major	<i>Allegro</i>	2.26
II		minor	<i>Allegro</i>	1.54
III	C sharp	major	<i>Andante</i> 21	3.08
IV		minor	<i>Andante</i>	2.05
V	D	major	<i>Vivace</i>	1.01
VI		minor	<i>Vivace</i>	1.12
VII	D sharp	major	<i>Sostenuto</i>	3.50
VIII		minor	<i>Allegro moderato</i>	1.41
IX	E	major	<i>Vivace</i>	2.06
X		minor	<i>Con moto</i>	4.03
XI	F	major	<i>Andante</i>	3.13
XII		minor	<i>Con moto</i>	5.27

XIII	F sharp	major	<i>Vivace</i>	1.21
XIV		minor	<i>Moderato</i>	3.08
XV	G	major	<i>Andante</i>	3.42
XVI		minor	<i>Andante</i>	2.31
XVII	G sharp	major	<i>Andantino</i>	5.02
XVIII		minor	<i>Allegro</i>	1.32
XIX	A	major	<i>Allegro spiritoso</i>	1.38
XX		minor	<i>Vivace</i>	1.41
XXI	A sharp	major	<i>Vivace</i>	1.31
XXII		minor	<i>Largo elegiaco</i>	3.47
XXIII	B	major	<i>Alla Marcia</i>	2.15
XXIV		minor	<i>Con brio</i>	1.21
Total				61.39

“The piano has always been at the centre of my musical life”

Francis Routh

The piano has always been at the centre of my musical life. At an early age I received basic lessons from my mother, who had herself been trained as a pianist at the Academy in Weimar, in the years before the First World War, 1907-09. From my study of the piano over many years, I found ways to approach music, and the making of music, for which the instrument has been for me a catalyst. To start with, I approached the piano as a student performer, who needed to learn the technique of performance, the physical control of the ten fingers as they explore and discover the keyboard, the span of which encompasses seven octaves, 87 semitones. Next, I appro-

ached the piano through the music composed for it, and I came to notice the historical evolution of the instrument itself, which has adapted to, indeed given rise to, the richly varied 300 year tradition of Western piano music. Finally, thanks to this very adaptability, I approached the piano through its universality, as the source of polyphonic sound, which makes it for the composer the natural testing-ground of new ideas and techniques. So it has figured prominently through the evolving stages of my compositions. I have always composed at the piano, and fresh musical structures, whether contrapuntal, harmonic, rhythmic or tonal, have often found their first outlet, and outward form, in a work for piano.

Occasionally such a new piece, started in this way, perhaps after being commissioned by a particular pianist,

who brought technical fluency to its performance as well as aesthetic insight into the humanity of the music, was infused in the process of performance with such a degree of expression that the continuation of it, and the further exploitation of the musical idea thus set in motion seemed possible, inevitable, on a larger scale and within the wider, more public scope of an orchestral work. So, *multum in parvo*, *Celebration* for solo piano, first commissioned by the American pianist Jeffrey Jacob for a world tour in 1984, was enlarged and developed into *Poème Fantastique* for piano and orchestra (1989). The same thing happened some years later, when a chamber music piece *Symphonic Variations* for clarinet and piano, led directly, by the sheer energy and momentum of its performance, and the new sonorities thus created, to its transposition into the

larger concept of *Symphony II*, and its reincarnation as an orchestral *vivace*; a public as distinct from a private statement.

In all these cases the driving force behind the music was the discovery and realisation of a new aesthetic idea, born of the restless radicalism of the 20th century, which had led composers to strive to extend the musical idiom into a fresh area of tonality that, while including the major/minor key system defined by the diatonic scale, at the same time reached beyond it. Music is the tonal art, and the diatonic scale is one manifestation of that underlying principle, that dynamic force called tonality. After completing my *Symphony II* (2006), my next composition was a self-imposed commission arising naturally from it, *24 Preludes for Piano*. I decided to put what I had

discovered to a wider test, by formalising the new 'scale of extended tonality', (the whole-tone scale plus the perfect fourth), which was by this time colouring my musical idiom, and thus to find out whether, by using both versions of it, major and minor, on each of the twelve semitones of the octave, it would satisfactorily impose a new tonal order on the music of *The Well-Tempered Pianist*. It was by this means that Bach had used the diatonic scale to impose a new tonal order on the music of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*.

Like the 20th century, the Baroque background of the 17th century, against which Bach worked, was a period of transition and aesthetic change in music. The former modal style, with a different mode, each with its own characteristically subjective features, on each note of the

scale, was giving way to the key-based, more objective tonal style of the classical period to come, and the single diatonic scale, with major or minor inflection, on each note. The octave came to be divided into 12 equal semitones, tuned artificially in a system known as equal temperament (called by Bach *Wohltemperirte*), which gradually became the general practice in the course of the 18th century, though not without much opposition. *Clavier* means keyboard, and Bach intended his *48 Preludes and Fugues* to be played on any of the keyboard instruments available in his day. Chiefly these included the clavicord, the harpsichord and the organ. Others were the virginal, particularly favoured in England, and the spinet; but not yet the piano, which was still at an immature stage of development. The story goes that when an early model of a piano, by the leading

organ-builder of the time, Gottfried Silbermann, was shown to Bach for his approval, the comments were anything but complimentary. It was not until much later in the 18th century that the piano reached maturity of design, and an instrument by the Viennese piano-maker Andreas Stein earned Mozart's warm approval. This coming of age of the piano coincided with the Mozart – Beethoven period of the classical tradition of piano music, of which Bach was the originator.

Our modern grand piano is qualitatively no different, in technical specification, from the instrument available to Beethoven; the neutral quality of sound, the tuning in equal temperament, the means of tone production by the striking of the strings with a hammer (called by Beethoven *Hammerklavier*), and the control of an evanescent pianistic *sostenuto*.

As for the tradition of the piano prelude, as a free-standing, separate piece, this has been enriched by numerous composers of the later 19th and 20th centuries, notably, among many others, Chopin, Debussy and Shostakovich. Their direct link with Bach was shown by their composing sets of 24 Preludes, to which they brought their characteristic qualities; Chopin his poetry and pianistic virtuosity, Debussy his discovery of new areas of tonality, particularly the whole-tone scale; Shostakovich his use of colour. Music has changed and moved on since Beethoven; the piano has remained constant. Two centuries of continuous musical growth have confirmed its aesthetic validity for many traditions, now and into the future.



Charles Matthews

photo: Cristine Donnier - Valentin

Thoughts on learning and performing Francis Routh's 24 Preludes for Piano

Charles Matthews

This has been a challenging but exhilarating project for me. The chance to work with a composer offers wonderful insights – what would we not give to be able to consult composers of previous generations? Every pianist preparing these pieces must face

certain challenges; here are a few of the considerations that arise.

Francis Routh has sought to explore the possibilities of his 'extended tonal scale', using 24 inflections which match the well-known major and minor key systems. To quote a letter Routh wrote to me in 2007: "If that sounds like a recipe for complexity, I have tried correspondingly to simplify the other elements, like thematic ideas, structure, tempo etc." It is this

simplification that presents a challenge to the interpreter: Can one find enough contrast and shape to ensure that one's playing remains colourful, without compromising the intensity of the writing? Much of Routh's use of the piano echoes 19th century piano writing. However, his almost Baroque rhythmic energy tends to preclude much flexibility in tempo. The rubato, often acceptable in the works of Schumann, Chopin or Liszt, for example, is often inappropriate in Routh. This restriction increases the technical difficulty of some passages. On one occasion there was a discussion in the control-room about whether a particular prelude owed more to Bach or Liszt. My own view, though I chose not to mention it at the time, was that I had to play these preludes simply as Routh. Any attempt to emphasise a Bachian or Lisztian element simply did not work for me. A further issue about this music concerns its notation. Routh's scales often hint simultaneously at different

keys (in the major/minor sense). As a result, some passages look on the page more bewildering than they actually sound. I should encourage pianists – and, for that matter, any other musicians exploring Routh's music – to persevere well beyond this initial stage. There will be a point at which his idiom becomes suddenly and surprisingly natural.

Finally, although the Preludes are designed as a series, and proceed in a balanced way from one to another, they are all essentially single pieces, with few connections between them, apart from Routh's characteristic musical language. They were not even composed in numerical order. The composer has been pleased to allow me to perform selections of the Preludes, in all sorts of orders, within larger programmes. I urge pianists and listeners alike to feel free either to experience these works as a complete set, or else to dip into them, in the same way that one might consult a reference-book.

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CHARLES MATTHEWS / piano

The Well-Tempered Pianist was composed between 2006-8, and first performed in public by Charles Matthews on various occasions, and at different venues in the course of 2007-2010. The Preludes were played in small groups of two or three, and often interspersed with Preludes and Fugues from Bach's *48 Preludes and Fugues*, and Preludes by Chopin.

The Well-Tempered Pianist, 24 Preludes for Piano, are a study in tonality, taking as a starting point Bach's *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*. Routh's 'scale of extended tonality', which has coloured his works progressively since first being spelt out in *Tragic Interludes for solo oboe* (1982), is used as the matrix of each Prelude, in the same way that Bach used the diatonic scale for his *48 Preludes and Fugues*.