

# THE PRELUDES

## I

**T**HE Preludes bear the opus number 28 and are dedicated to J. C. Kessler, a well-known composer of piano studies during Chopin's time. But it is only the German edition that bears his name, the French and English editions being inscribed by Chopin "à son ami Pleyel." As Pleyel advanced the pianist 2,000 francs for these compositions he had the right to say: "These are my Preludes." Niecks is authority for the remark of Chopin: "I sold the Preludes to Pleyel because he liked them." This was in 1838, when Chopin's health demanded a change of climate; he wished to go to Majorca with George Sand and her children, and had applied for money to the piano-maker and publisher, Camille Pleyel of Paris. He received but five hundred francs in advance, the balance being paid on delivery of the manuscript. The Preludes were published in 1839, yet there is internal evidence that proves most of them had been composed before the trip to the Balearic Islands. This fact may upset the pretty legend of music-making at the monastery of Valdemoso. Have we not all read with sweet credulity the eloquent pages by George Sand in which is described the storm that overtook the novelist and her son Maurice! After terrible trials, dangers, delays, they reached home and found Chopin at the piano. Uttering a cry he arose and stared at the storm-beaten pair. "Ah! I knew well that you were dead!" It was the sixth Prelude, the one in B minor, that he played, and dreaming, as Sand writes, "that he saw himself drowned in a lake; heavy, cold drops of water fell at regular intervals on his breast; and when I called attention to those drops of water which were actually falling on the roof, he denied having heard them. He was even vexed at what I translated by the term 'imitative harmony.' He protested with all his might, and he was right, against the puerility of these imitations for the ear. His genius was full of mysterious harmonies of nature."

Yet this Prelude was composed previous to the Majorcan episode. "The Preludes," says Niecks, "consist, to a great extent at least, of pickings from the composer's portfolios, of pieces, sketches and memoranda written at various times and kept to be utilized when occasion might offer." Gutmann, a pupil who nursed Chopin to the end, declared the Preludes to have been composed before he went away with Madame Sand, and to Niecks personally Gutmann maintained that he copied all

of them. Niecks, however, does not altogether credit him, as there are letters in which several of the Preludes are mentioned as being sent to Paris; so he reaches the conclusion that "Chopin's labors at Majorca on the Preludes were confined to selecting, filing and polishing." This seems a sensible solution. Robert Schumann wrote of these Preludes: "I must signalize them as most remarkable. I confess I expected something quite different, carried out in the grand style of his Studies. It is almost the contrary here; these are sketches, the beginning of studies, or, if you will, ruins, eagle's feathers, all strangely intermingled. But in every piece we find in his own hand—'Frédéric Chopin wrote it.' One recognizes him in his pauses, in his impetuous respiration. He is the boldest, the proudest, poet-soul of his time. To be sure, the book also contains some morbid, feverish, repellent traits, but let every one look in it for something that will enchant him. Philistines, however, must keep away."

It was in these Preludes that Ignaz Moscheles first comprehended Chopin and his methods of execution. The German pianist had found his music harsh and dilettantish in modulation, but Chopin's original performance—"he glides lightly over the keys in a fairy-like way with his delicate fingers"—quite reconciled the elder man to this strange music. To Liszt the Preludes are too modestly named, but he dwells too much on Chopin's "marked irritability and exhaustion." Liszt, as usual, erred on the side of sentimentality. Chopin, essentially a man of moods, like many great poets, cannot always be pinned down to any particular period. Several of the Preludes are morbid, as is some of his early music, while just before his death he seems quite gay. "The Preludes follow out no technical idea, are free creations on a small basis and exhibit the musician in all his versatility . . . much is embryonic . . . Often it is as though they were small falling-stars dissolved into tones as they fall." Thus Louis Ehlert. Jean Kleczynski thinks that "people have gone too far in seeking in the Preludes for traces of the misanthropy and weariness of life to which he was a prey during his sojourn in Majorca," and asks if the D minor, the last Prelude of the series, is not strong and energetic, "concluding as it does with three cannon-shots." The truth is, Niecks is right. Mr. Henry James, always an admirer of Madame