JULIUS ASAL

piano

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945)

**Suite Op. 14**

Allegretto
Scherzo
Allegro molto - Sostenuto
Sostenuto
(approx. 9 minutes)

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)

**Ballades Op. 10**

Andante – Allegro
Andante espressivo e dolce
Intermezzo. Allegro
Andante con moto
(approx. 24 minutes)

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

**Burlesques Op. 8c**

1. Quarrel
2. A Little Bit Tipsy
3. Molto vivo, capriccioso

(approx. 8 minutes)

- INTERMISSION -

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873–1943)

**Preludes Op. 32**

No. 1 in C major. Allegro vivace
No. 2 in B♭ minor. Allegretto
No. 3 in E major. Allegro vivace
No. 4 in E minor. Allegro con brio
No. 5 in G major. Moderato
No. 6 in F minor. Allegro appassionato
No. 7 in F major. Moderato
No. 8 in A minor. Vivo

No. 9 in A major. Allegro moderato

No. 10 in B minor. Lento

No. 11 in B major. Allegretto

No. 12 in G♯ minor. Allegro

No. 13 in D♭ major. Grave – Allegro

(approx. 45 minutes)

## Béla Bartók

## Suite Op. 14

The Hungarian composer, ethnomusicologist and pianist Béla Bartók was a major contributor to the keyboard literature of the 20th century. His musical style was much influenced by the kinds of folk music that he collected and recorded deep in the remote countrysides of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia alongside fellow composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967). But just as important to this classically trained musician were the musical practices of Bach and Beethoven, without excluding the modern innovations of Debussy, Stravinsky and Schoenberg.

His music is thus an amalgam of folk and high-art musical practices, with many of its Lego pieces (scales, melodies, harmonies) drawn from the sounds of folk music but packaged in the forms and genres of Western art music.

In Bartók's keyboard textures, the roughly resonant timbres of village music-making are mimicked in the way that major 7ths replace octaves and dense tone clusters evoke the bright buzzing overtones of zithers and other metallic folk instruments.

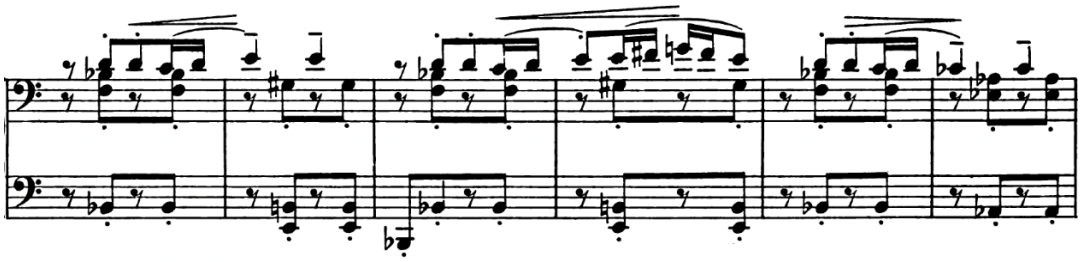
The confusion that might result from being suddenly immersed in the sound world of the Central European countryside is counterbalanced however by the clear quasi-metronomic framework provided to the ear of the listener by the easy-to-follow *ostinati* and other simple repetitive groupings with which his scores are marbled.

* * *

Bartók's four-movement Suite Op. 14 (1916) represents well these features of his style. Its sparse keyboard texture is a deliberate choice of the composer, who in a radio interview from 1944 recalled:

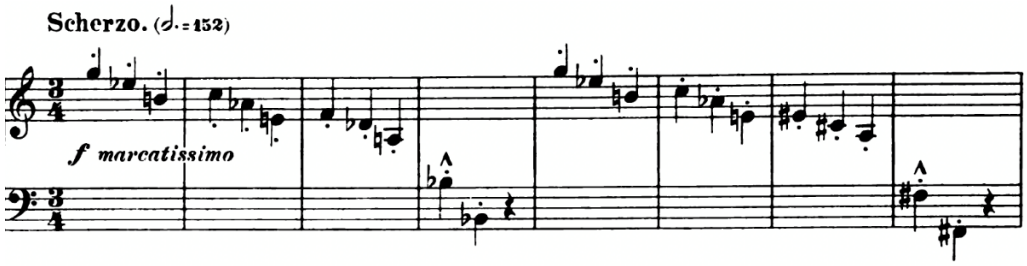
> *When this work was composed I had in mind the refining of piano technique into a more transparent style, a style more of bone and muscle opposing the heavy chordal style of the late Romantic period.*

The opening *Allegretto* is dominated by the repeated rhythmic patterns of Romanian dance music.



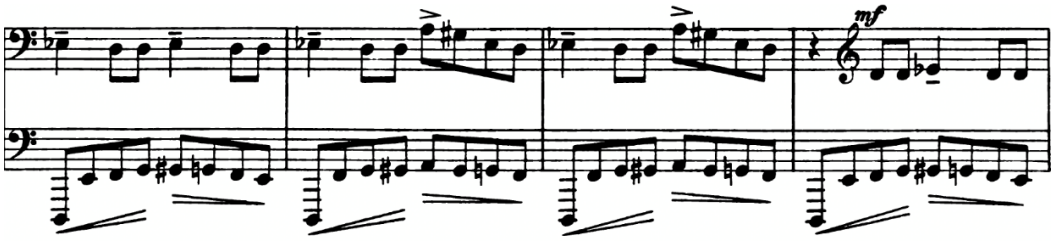
The "exotic" sound of this opening tune derives from its use of the Lydian mode, with its raised 4th scale degree, and from the corresponding harmonic contrast between the tonalities of B-flat and E (a tritone apart).

The *Scherzo* second movement is a playful romp animated by downward cascades and upward surges of harmonically unstable augmented chords, arpeggiated over several octaves.

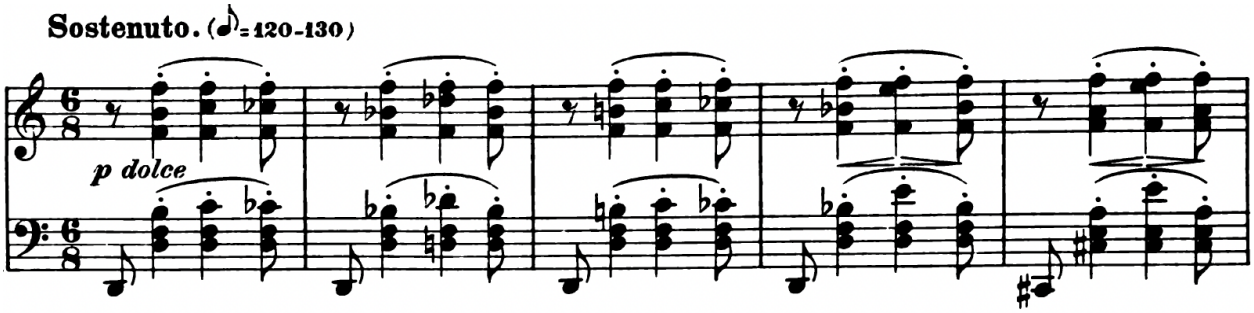



This is Bartók treating the piano as an almost exclusively percussive instrument.

The third movement *Allegro molto* is inspired by the Arab music that Bartók heard in North Africa. It is a *moto perpetuo* toccata with a scurrying ostinato in the left hand on top of which a punchy right hand obsesses over the pitches D-E-flat-A-G#




With three fast movements under his belt, Bartók closes his Suite with a slow movement, the mysteriously pulsing *Sostenuto* that establishes a syncopated "sighing" motive in its opening bars.

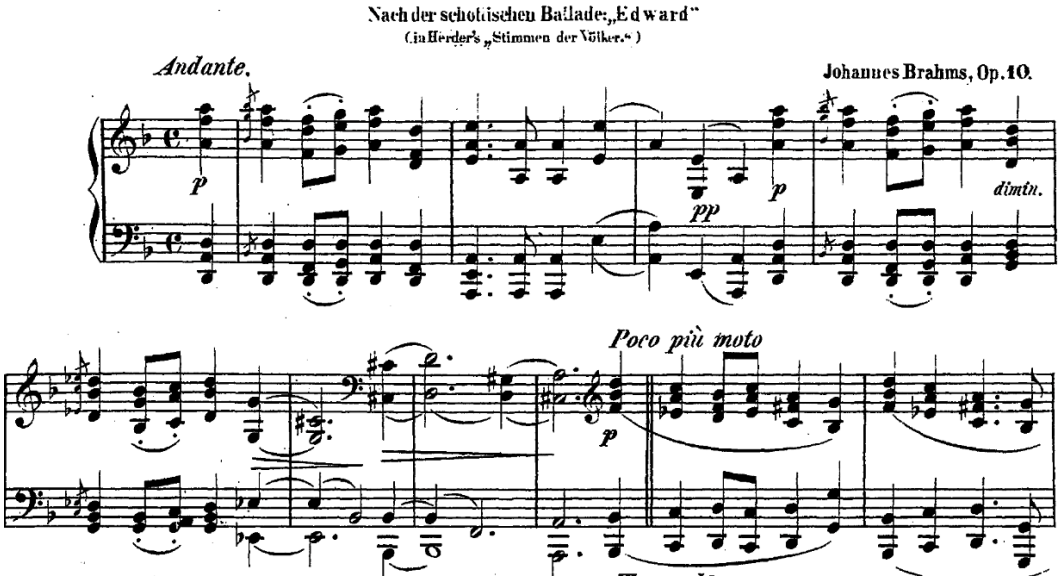



The slow pace and repeated pattern of this accompaniment serve as a background to the bitonally flavourful melodic excursions that venture timidly out to claim the listener's ear.

## Johannes Brahms
## Ballades Op. 10

The four Ballades Op. 10 are youthful works and represent Brahms' first foray into the keyboard genre that would define the Romantic era: the *character piece.* Their deeply serious tone is perhaps a reflection of the mood of the Schumann household in the summer of 1854 when these pieces were composed, a time when the 21-year-old Brahms was helping Clara Schumann manage with the children in the aftermath of her husband Robert's attempted suicide and subsequent institutionalization.

The *ballad* as a genre is a narrative poem, and thus each of the four pieces of Op. 10 is deemed to be telling a story. But the exact nature of that story is only available to us for ***Ballade No. 1***, the so-called "Edward" ballade, inspired by a Scottish "murder ballad" that Brahms had read in the German translation of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803).



The poem is structured as a series of questions and responses between a mother and her son, the dark nature of which is exemplified by the first line:

*Why does your sword so drip with blood, Edward?*

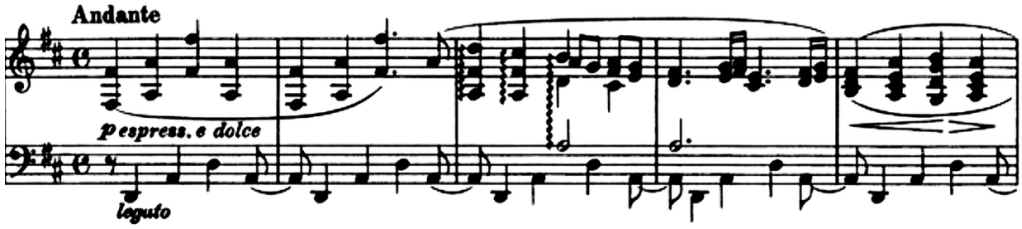
As the tale progresses it is teased out that a father has been murdered by his own son but with the even more shocking reveal that the mother was involved, too.

Their conversational exchange is consistently reflected in the score, with the opening *Andante* being the mother's first questioning followed by the son's response in the *Poco più moto.* A developmental middle section evokes the increasingly emotional nature of the dialogue until a varied version of the opening section returns to sum up the horror of the tale.

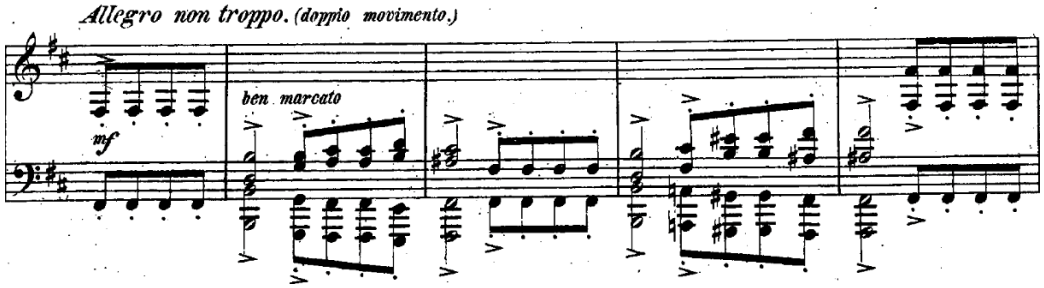
Brahms' poetic imagination is transferred brilliantly to the keyboard in this piece. The ancient era of the story is evoked through simple triadic harmonies, stark, bare open intervals and a breadth of spacing in the chordal structure that bespeaks the chill of a stone-cold tomb.

* * *

Whatever the story line of ***Ballade No. 2*** might be, it obviously involves a sudden reversal of fortunes, given the extreme contrast between its outer and middle sections. It opens by lulling the listener's ear into a dream state with a harmonic haze created by gently pulsing pedal tones in the bass while widely spaced arpeggiated chords imitate the harp of a medieval minstrel.

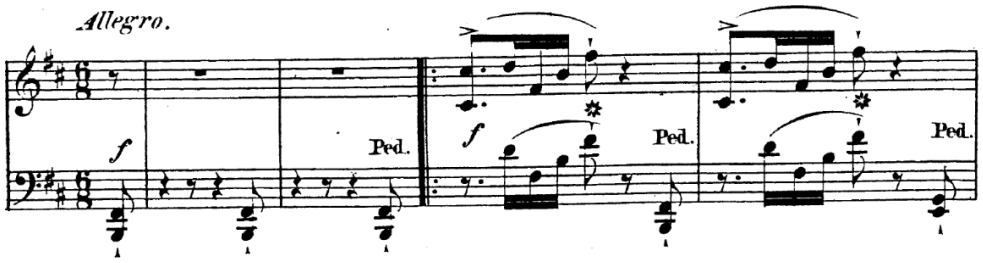



The *Allegro non troppo* middle section, by contrast, with its repeating pattern of hammered 8th notes, bespeaks grim determination in the face of adversity.



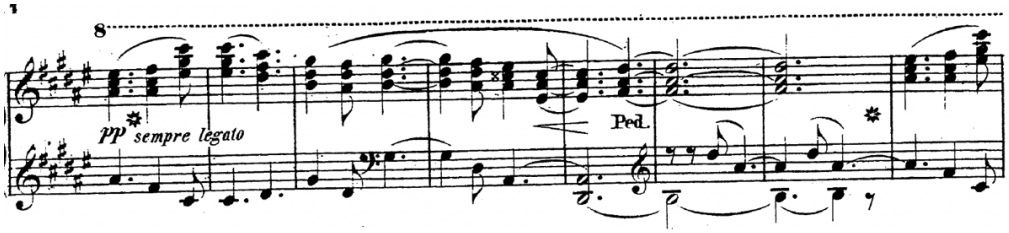

As in all the Ballades in this set, it closes with a varied reprise of the opening.

Metrical ambiguity is the prominent characteristic of *Ballade No. 3,* which opens with dryly articulated *forte* punctuations on the very last 8th of the 6/8 bar that, coming out of silence, are indistinguishable from downbeats.



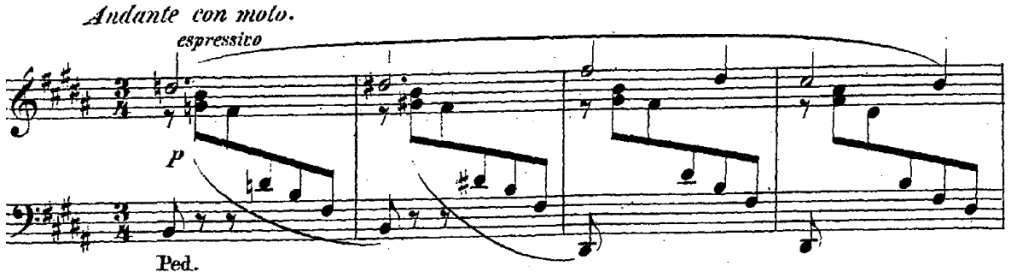

Despite being labelled an *Intermezzo,* this piece displays the mischievous rhythmic play and repetition of small motivic units more typical of a scherzo.

Even its contrasting "trio" section — wildly contrasting as it might be in register, dynamics and tone colour — is not free of ties across the bar line that leave it free-floating in rhythmic as well as in tonal space.

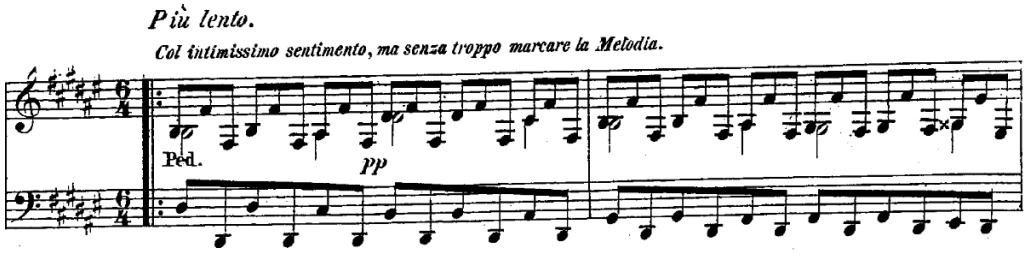



In short, this piece is the toe-tapping equivalent of a tongue-twister.

*Ballade No. 4* is the most serenely "Brahmsian" piece of the set in terms of mood, although its texture is distinctly Schumannesque, opening with a songful melody in the top voice supported by gently cascading broken chords below.




Its middle section is also quite Schumannesque, with a long-limbed melody buried in the middle of a sonic pudding of enveloping harmonies.



These four Ballades show Brahms in an experimental phase in his development as a composer, toying with different sound colours and innovating with keyboard textures in a way that he would later put aside to concentrate more on increased motivic density and classically proportioned formal structuring.

## Béla Bartók

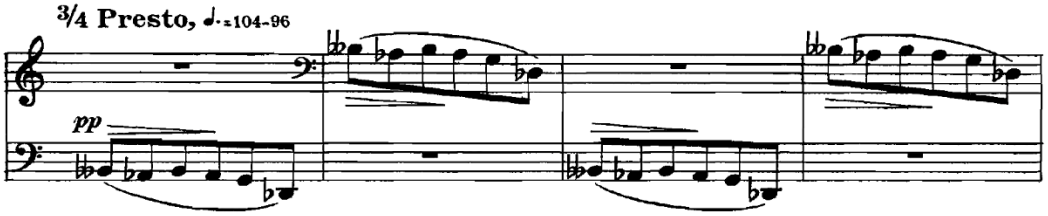
## Burlesques Op. 8c

The three pieces in Bartók's *Burlesques* Op. 8c were written in 1908, 1910 and 1911 respectively, a period when his travels through the rural areas of Hungary and Romania gave him the inspiration to compose many folk-inspired short pieces that combine the composer's percussive style of writing with his ribald sense of keyboard humour.

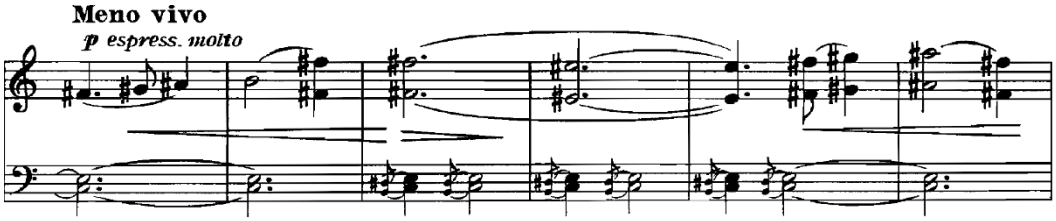
The facetious nature of the titling in the set is evident from Bartók's remark to his future wife, Márta Ziegler (1893–1967), written on a draught manuscript of the first piece, quoted in the *New Grove* (s.v. "Bartók"):

> *Please choose one of the titles: "Anger because of an interrupted visit" or "Rondoletto à capriccio" or "Vengeance is sweet" or "Play it if you can" or "November 27 [1908]."*

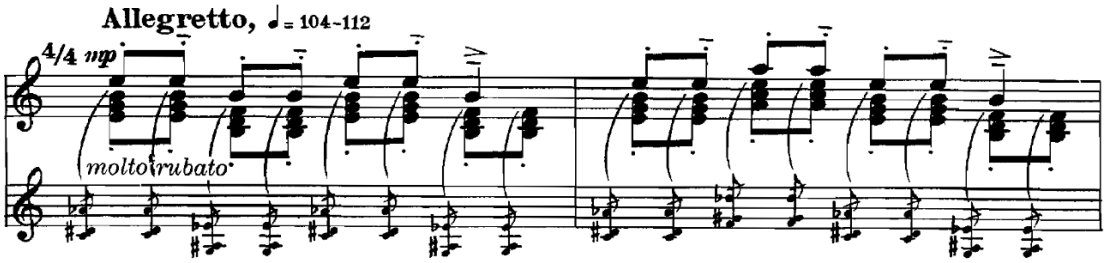
In the end, Bartók chose ***Quarrel,*** a title appropriate because of the cross-chatter between the right and left hands that opens the piece and continues mindlessly for some time.



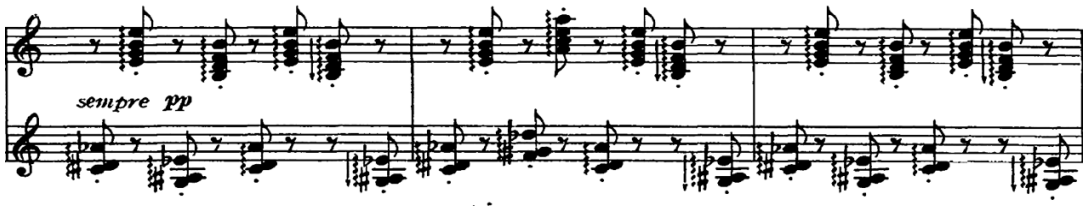

And even when the nattering quiets down in the middle section, the parody of a useless argument continues with bitonal griping:



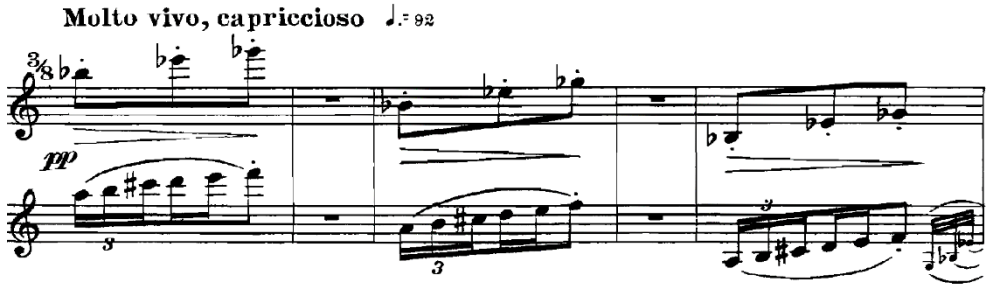
The title *A Little Bit Tipsy* is self-evidently descriptive for the second piece, with its off-kilter chordal melody imitating the staggering gait of someone who has had just a few too many.



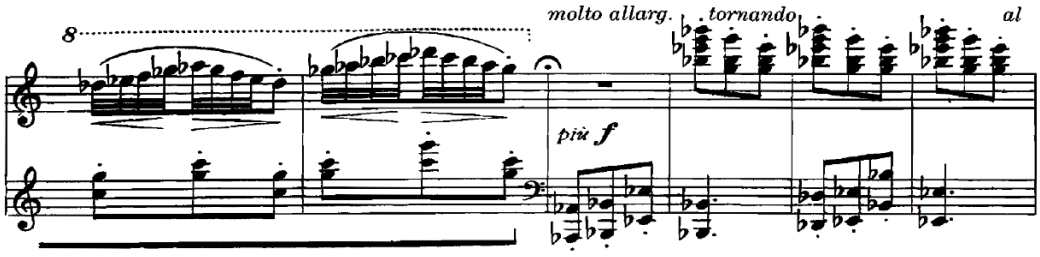

Not to mention the stumbling, staggering passages such as:




The humorous qualities of the third piece, *Molto vivo, capriccioso,* are too numerous to count, starting with how the naughtily scurrying figures that open the piece and are interrupted by sudden deadpan silences.




The contrast between these light-fingered "mice-in-the-barn" figures and the heavy, cartoonish thumping of octave-and-chord textures



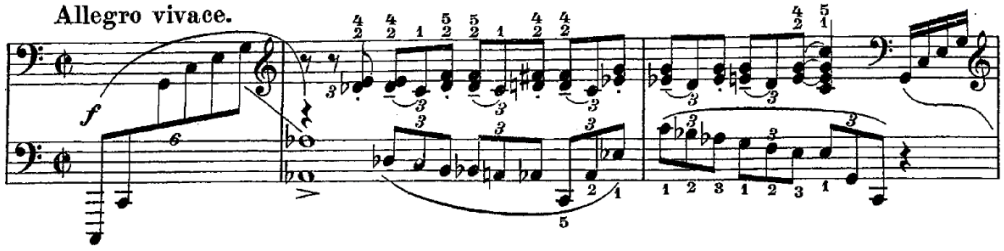

lies at the centre of this finale's appeal.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

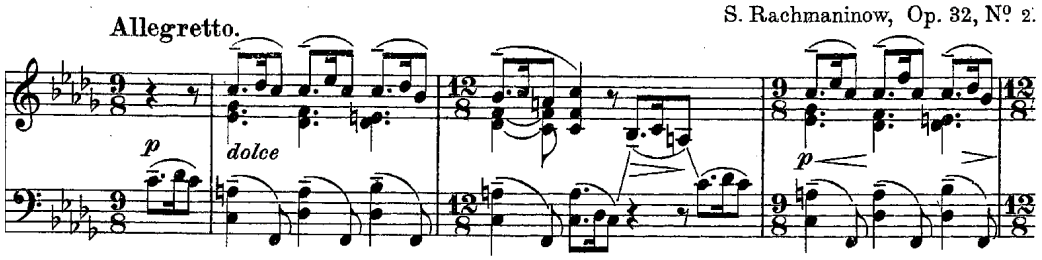
Preludes Op. 32

With his Op. 32 Rachmaninoff completed his set of preludes in all the major and minor keys, after already publishing his famous Prelude in C# minor Op. 3, No. 2 (1892) and the 10 Preludes Op. 23 (1901, 1903).

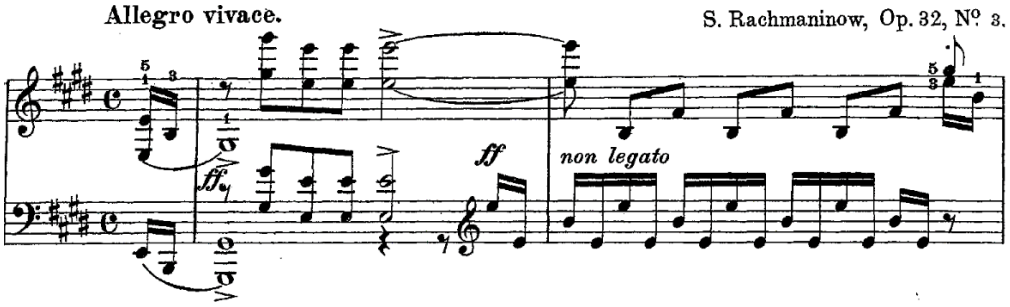
The Op. 32 set surges onto the stage from the bottom of the keyboard in the *Prelude No. 1 in C major* in a series of defiant gestures that, while lacking any clear lyrical melody, are possessed of considerable textural heft.



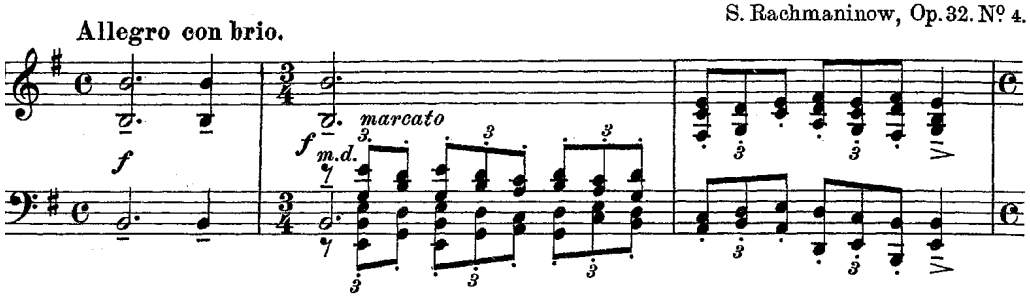

The *Prelude No. 2 in B-flat minor* is a sad, dance-like piece that introduces for the first time the *siciliano* rhythm that will recur in other preludes in the set.



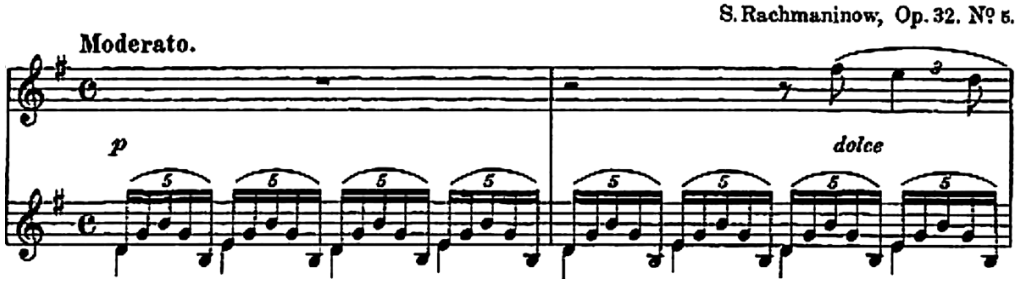

The *Prelude No. 3 in E major* finds Rachmaninoff in a military mood, alternating bold calls-to-arms with frothy celebratory chatter.



In the *Prelude No. 4 in E minor* Rachmaninoff opposes two radically contrasting motives: a series of falling "sigh" motives that evolve into an echoing bell chime, and its chattering response of triplets in a contrasting register that drives the piece to its climax.

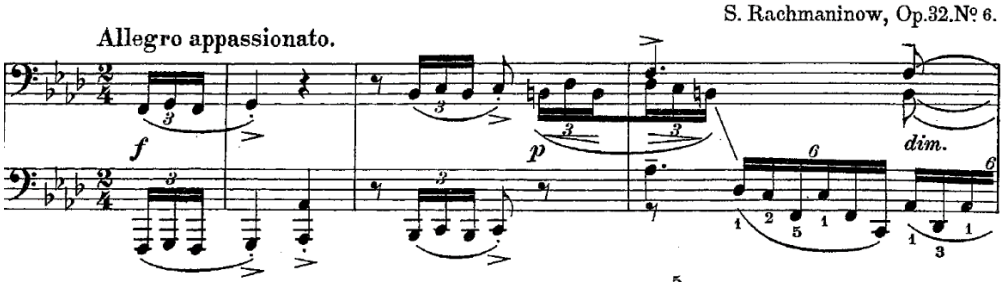



Those yearning for lyrical melody in these texturally dense preludes will find solace in the *Prelude No. 5 in G major,* in which a delicate melody is allowed to flower in the high register over a murmuring accompaniment in the mid-range.

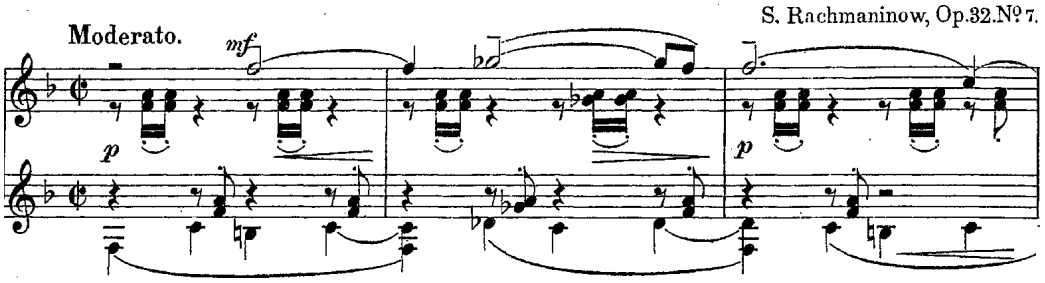



When listening to this prelude it is hard not to think of birds chirping on a clear, cold winter's day.

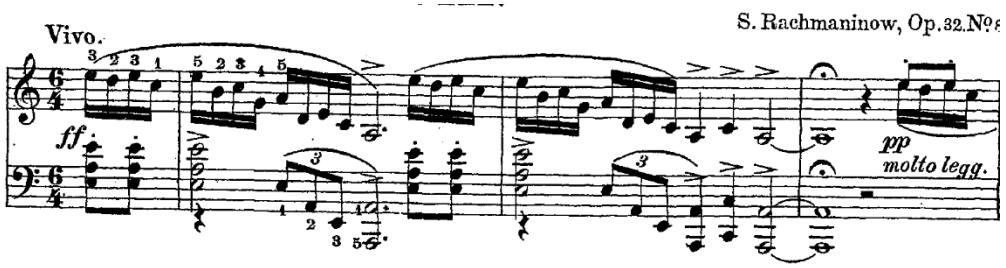
Anger verging on despair seems to be the mood emanating from the snarling growls of the *Prelude No. 6 in F minor.*



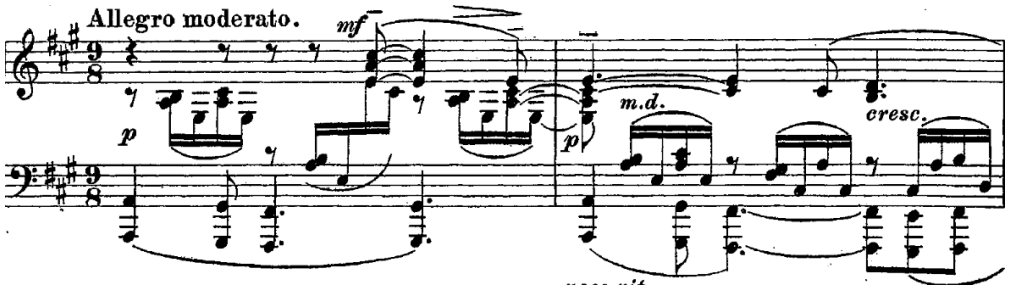
Relief from all this drama arrives in the *Prelude No. 7 in F major*, an amiable duet between left and right hands.



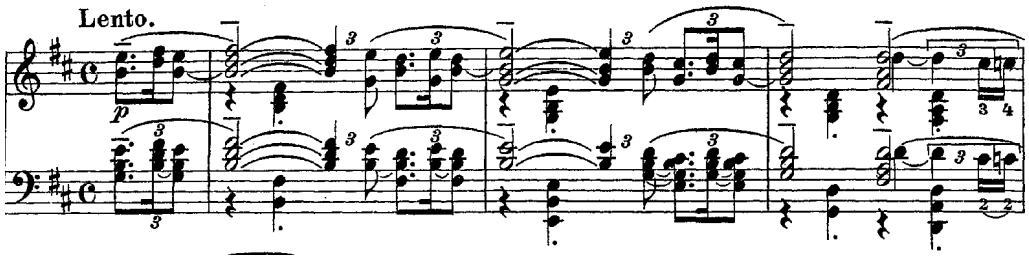

Rachmaninoff's relentless sense of rhythmic drive returns in the *Prelude No. 8 in A minor,* another tour-de-force of figural scamper over wide swathes of the keyboard.



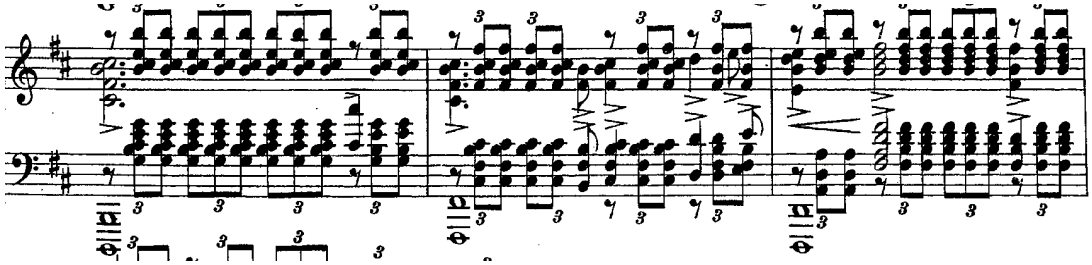

The unusually thickly textured *Prelude No. 9 in A major* rolls out a rich carpet of piano tone in three layers throughout, richly interwoven with counter-melodies in constant conversation.




The towering masterpiece of the Op. 32 set is the *Prelude No. 10 in B minor*, a work that is Russian to the core. Pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890–1963), in conversation with Rachmaninoff, wisely guessed its emotional wellspring: a yearning to return to his native Russia, and despair for a homecoming that would never come.

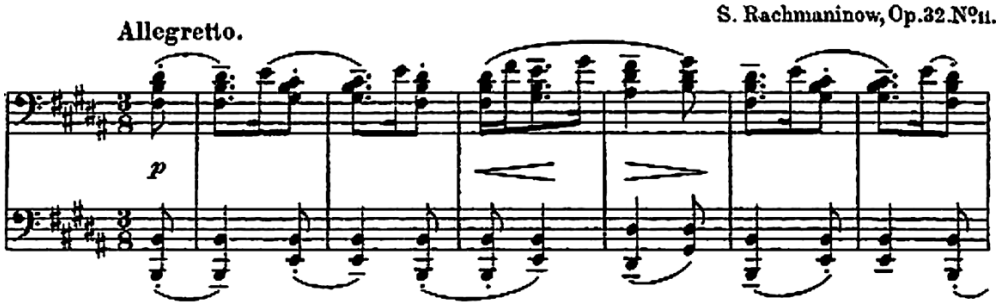


Its principal motive is a dotted *siciliano* figure, wavering modally between major and minor, that is soon accompanied, and then overwhelmed, by an utterly heartbreaking convulsion of sobs in throbbing triplets that reverberate clangorously like massive swaying church bells, thundering in vain towards a resolution that never arrives.

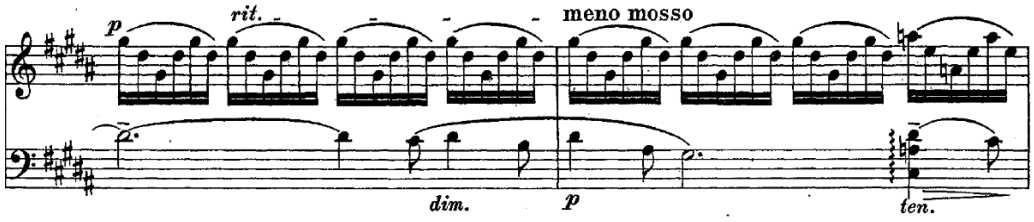


Ukrainian refugees, if present at this recital, will be uniquely placed to understand how simply gutted Rachmaninoff must have been when committing this piece to paper.

By way of gentle consolation, the *siciliano* rhythm returns in the ***Prelude No. 11 in B major,*** a piece that rarely rises above a *piano* dynamic level.

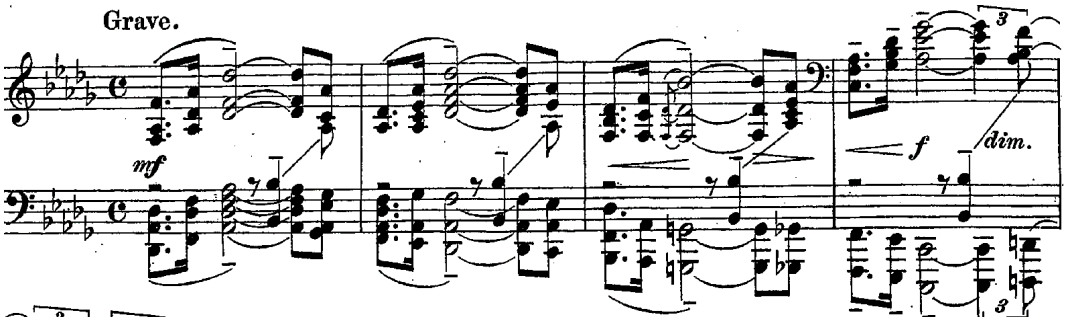



The sound of sleigh bells greets the ear in the jangling accompaniment figure of open 5ths that begins the ***Prelude No. 12 in G sharp minor***, a favourite encore piece of Vladimir Horowitz.




It features a pensive baritone melody that emerges to plead its case with ever-increasing urgency in the darker regions of the keyboard below.

There is a wistful quality of commemoration to the opening of the ***Prelude No. 13 in D-flat major,*** in which Rachmaninoff puts the full resources of the piano's resonance at the service of this finale with elephantine chords designed for his own huge hands.




With reminiscences of the *siciliano* motive in his final prelude, and the thundering tolling bells of **Prelude No. 10 in B minor** recalled as well, Rachmaninoff closes this set of preludes with a fitting tribute to the piano's majestic power to move minds and souls in the grand Russian manner.

Donald G. Gíslason 2026