# The *Twenty-Four Preludes* of John Burge: Scholarly Notes to Accompany a Performance and Recording Project

by

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## Abstract

The full thesis for this degree consists of three components: a recording of John Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes* for solo piano, scholarly notes to accompany this recording, and a final solo piano recital presenting this work. The recording was produced in May, 2016 at the University of Alberta's Convocation Hall on a Hamburg Steinway Model D-274 concert grand piano, while the recital was presented at the same venue on September 11, 2016 at 8:00 p.m. The scholarly notes represent the first academic evaluation of Canadian composer John Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes* (2015), and seek to position this recent composition within a historical context spanning over three centuries. The notes analyze the preludes both as a set and individually, and explore the technical challenges (including various extended techniques), extra-musical associations, pedagogical applications, and theoretical and compositional features of this music. The scholarly notes also reflect on the challenges of performing the complete set of preludes in a live concert, and discuss the nature of the keyboard idioms found in the work. Finally, by considering large-scale connections within the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, and by comparing the work to other piano works in the same genre or of a similar scale, this essay evaluates the significance of Burge's composition, both within the landscape of Canadian piano music, and within the broader piano literature as a whole.

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First and foremost, it would take many more words than this to express my gratitude to the composer of the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, Dr. John Burge. Having studied his music for many years, I was overwhelmed and honoured when I received the dedication of these preludes, and beginning to delve into this set has been both a pleasure and a privilege. I look forward to performing the *Preludes* for years to come.

One of the major degree requirements was a recording of the repertoire on this recital, completed earlier this summer under the technical guidance of Russell Baker – his generosity and expertise allowed me to complete this degree component within a very tight schedule.

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**John Burge (b. 1961): *Twenty-Four Preludes* for solo piano (2015)**

The *Twenty-Four Preludes* of Canadian composer John Burge (b. 1961) represent the continuation of a centuries-old tradition of composing sets of preludes in all major and minor keys. Far from being an empty exercise in composing in all keys, this set offers consistent variety throughout its two dozen character pieces, each of which functions effectively both as an individual piece and as a member of the larger collection. As such, this work not only represents one of Burge's finest creative achievements, but also merits comparison to landmarks of the repertoire like the prelude sets of Chopin and Debussy.

Readers unfamiliar with John Burge's music may be interested in learning about his background. Born in 1961 in Dryden, Ontario, Burge grew up in Calgary, ultimately completing degrees in composition and theory from the University of Toronto (B.Mus. and M.Mus.) and the University of British Columbia (D.M.A.).[1] Since 1987 Burge has taught at Queen's University, where, in addition to teaching theory and composition, he periodically leads a course on the music of Chopin. An excellent pianist himself, Burge has written a substantial body of piano works (ranging from character pieces and pedagogical studies to advanced études and two concertos), many of which reveal his veneration of Chopin. However, despite the prominence of piano music in his output, Burge's reputation both in Canada and abroad is largely based on his contributions to the choral repertoire. His excellent chamber and orchestral works are equally deserving of attention and performance – his string work *Flanders Field Reflections* was awarded the 2009 JUNO award for the Best Canadian Classical Composition – and it is a

[1] John Burge, "Bios," JohnBurge.ca, accessed June 22, 2016, https://johnburge.ca/page/bios

testament to his talent and industry that he continues to compose new works at a steady rate despite his busy teaching and adjudicating schedule.

Viewed as a set, the *Twenty-Four Preludes* are Burge's most substantial solo piano work to date, but in my initial readings of the new work, it was the striking variety and singular clarity of the individual preludes that captured my imagination. Each of the pieces demands undivided attention and care, and until this has been furnished, it is impossible to develop a sense of the overall work. Conversely, each prelude can be heard as a distillation of the collection, and it is difficult to fully appreciate one prelude without understanding the others. This reciprocal relationship between the individual and the whole is at the heart of many of the great sets of preludes, and so in a poetic sense, it is equally impossible to appreciate a set like the *Twenty-Four Preludes* without being familiar with the broader literature of the genre. Fortunately, this wider repertoire is well established, and most pianists have studied or performed preludes from sets by composers including Bach, Chopin, Debussy, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and Shostakovich, among others.[2]

Burge acknowledges the influence of two of these masterworks in particular. While identifying Chopin's Op. 28 preludes as a primary inspiration – more on that in a moment – he also considers Debussy's two books of preludes to be touchstones, due to their "expressive textural sonorities and colour."[3] That Burge provides subtitles for fourteen of his preludes also reveals Debussy's contribution to the genre: whereas Chopin's preludes are entirely non-

[2] While the composers listed here wrote sets of twenty-four preludes encompassing all major and minor keys, it is worth noting that some composers of prelude sets have eschewed the constraints of formal key structures. Claude Debussy, for example, does not traverse all twenty-four keys in his two exquisite volumes of preludes. By way of a lesser-known example, William Duckworth's twenty-four *Time Curve Preludes* (1978) do not follow traditional key models, but are arguably one of the most cohesive sets of preludes due to their distinctive postminimalist idiom.

[3] Burge, "Twenty-Four Preludes - Piano Solo (2015)," JohnBurge.ca, accessed June 22, 2016, https://johnburge.ca/item/view/140

programmatic, Debussy appended descriptive titles to his preludes. Brilliantly, Debussy only indicated the titles after the final measure of each prelude, as if to suggest that the programmatic associations should only be an afterthought (in a sense, the music is literally a prelude to the imagery of the title). While Burge's titles occupy a more traditional position on the score, they are often similarly evocative, and serve as interpretive signposts for the pianist.

While Burge's multifaceted preludes share other common traits with pieces by Debussy (and indeed with a number of the prelude sets by composers mentioned above), it is Chopin's set of Preludes, Op. 28 that provides the clearest touchstone. Burge acknowledges that his "preludes draw their primary influence from Chopin's Opus 28 set," and the extent of this influence can be in the key relationships of the *Twenty-Four Preludes*.[4] Burge explains that he composed

> one prelude in each major and minor key, employing the exact same ordering of keys used by Chopin. Beginning with the first two preludes in C major and A minor (the major and minor keys sharing the same key signature) the pattern of keys repeats by ascending Perfect Fifths (Numbers 3 and 4 are in G major and E minor) until reaching the final pair of preludes in F major and D minor.[5]

This ordering stands in contrast to the system used by Bach in *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier* (the oldest significant example of the practice of composing preludes in all keys), in which the preludes and fugues are arranged in pairs of parallel major and minor keys in a rising chromatic sequence (i.e., C major followed by C minor, then C-sharp major and C-sharp minor, D major and so on).[6]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., *Twenty-Four Preludes for solo piano* (Red Leaf Pianoworks, 2015), inside front cover (no page number).

[6] Other arrangements of keys are of course possible, but a majority of composers writing in all twenty-four keys have followed one of the two models set by Bach and Chopin.

More significant than issues of key relationships, however, is the relationship between the character and form of Chopin's Preludes Op. 28 and Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes*. Despite being over 150 years old, Chopin's preludes sound almost modern and spontaneous in their expressive urgency and trenchant forms, and even today these pieces retain a sense of combustive immediacy when performed well. To paraphrase the words of Charles Rosen in *The Romantic Generation*, each of Chopin's preludes generates a tension for which there is no intended resolution, and I believe it is this quality that makes the genre of the prelude so potent .[7] After all, the term *prelude* suggests that something else must follow, creating expectation and anticipation on the part of the listener.[8] This quality is magnified when preludes are presented as a set or cycle; in the case of Chopin's preludes, connecting or unifying elements are arguably absent, causing Rosen to posit that "to the extent to which the Preludes are a cycle – that is, a work in which the significance as well as the effectiveness of the individual numbers depends on their place within a larger order – they are the most radical of all the Romantic examples."[9] Other composers of sets of preludes have approached this compositional conundrum from a variety of avenues. Several of Debussy's preludes, for example, subtly share motivic material (e.g., *Le vent dans la plaine* and *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest*), whereas by contrast, Rachmaninoff's more disparate preludes were likely not originally conceived as a whole set, despite the fact that they cover all twenty-four keys (divided between three opus numbers).

Burge's approach to this quirk of the genre (i.e., that preludes create unresolved expectations which may be either emphasized or negated by larger processes within the set) will

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[7] Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 87.
[8] Burge explores this aspect of the genre in a newly composed piece called *Prelude to a Prelude* (2016), a jazzy miniature which riffs on the familiar arpeggiated figuration of Bach's first prelude in *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier*.
[9] Rosen, ibid.

be considered in the conclusion of these notes, where I will offer observations about the overall design and significance of the *Twenty-Four Preludes* as a set. In order to understand the work as a whole, however, we must first consider the pieces on an individual basis. As the following discussion will make clear, each prelude can be appreciated as an independent, original composition, but other interpretive possibilities come into focus when these pieces are considered both in the context of their neighbours, and in relation to "foreign" works by other composers.

Burge's set of *Twenty-Four Preludes* opens with the **Prelude No. 1 in C Major**, a piece described by the composer as "the springboard from which everything flows."[10] As Arnold Schoenberg is oft alleged to have quipped, there is still plenty of good music to be written in C major, and it strikes me that composers of piano preludes have often viewed this key as a blank canvas to be filled with quasi-improvisational patterns, as though to "warm up" the ear. The opening prelude of Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier*, for example, fills this canvas with steadily flowing arpeggiated chords, and Chopin opens his Op. 28 set with a prelude built on a surging pattern imbued with the restless spirit of Romanticism. Following this tradition, Burge begins the *Twenty-Four Preludes* by occupying the right hand with a rocking pattern that gently undulates throughout most of the first prelude. Yet whereas Bach uses his pattern to generate tension by meandering through increasingly adventurous harmonies, and Chopin piques the ear by employing ambiguous cross-rhythms, Burge is content to let his pattern unfold in the background, instead drawing the listener's attention to an inner melodic line played by the thumb of the left hand. This melody is built out of sequential repetitions of a simple four-note motive in a confined range. Yet despite its simplicity, this motive derives a remarkable expressive power

[10] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes for solo piano* (Red Leaf Pianoworks, 2015), inside front cover.

from its dissonant third note, where Burge's use of an insistent rising semitone infuses this line with a yearning for resolution. This release is only achieved with the introduction of a low bass note in the fifth measure (at 0:18' in this recording) and the subsequent rising line that unfurls with the delicacy of flower petals opening at dawn. Any resolution is fleeting, however, and the rest of the piece is tinged with increasingly expressive chromaticism. Notably, Burge ends this opening prelude on an unresolved harmony infused with dominant suspensions (with the dissonant leading tone in the highest register and the final note being a rather isolated G, no less), imparting to the sensitive listener the realization that this prelude (true to the genre) is only a beginning.

In several ways, this opening prelude provides an excellent introduction to Burge's compositional idiom. In a general sense, it exemplifies the lush, neo-Romantic idiom found in many of Burge's works. More specifically, the use of a compact melodic motive as a unifying element is a recurring trait in Burge's music, foreshadowing the use of similar motives in other preludes. The fact that this melody resides in a middle "tenor" voice reveals the composer's preference for rich, dark timbres (akin to Brahms's affinity for the viola as a melodic instrument) and exemplifies his command of textures. Notable, too, is the symmetrical, balanced quality of the phrases. Many of Burge's earlier piano works (such as the *Studies in Poetry*) make frequent use of four-bar phrases, and this tendency is suggested in the opening measures of the Prelude No. 1 in C Major (with the fourth iteration of the melodic motive ending with a fermata). After outlining a four-measure idea, however, Burge continues on for two more bars, thus suggesting formal freedom and flexibility. This delicate balance will be explored throughout the following twenty-three preludes.

The second prelude in the cycle, subtitled **"Bells in Winter,"** holds particular significance for me. In 2013, while learning Burge's nine *Studies in Poetry* (a set of étude-like pieces, each taking its name from the title of a book of poetry), I sent Burge a copy of *Bells in Winter*, a 1978 volume of poetry by Polish poet Czesław Miłosz.[11] Knowing that the composer plans to write more *Studies in Poetry* in order to complete a set of twelve, I hoped that the title of the book might provide inspiration for one of the remaining études.[12] Ultimately, it was not the *Studies in Poetry* that took on Miłosz's title, but rather the second of the *Twenty-Four Preludes*. While Burge explains in his notes that he had already composed the Prelude No. 2 in A Minor when he received the book of poems, "he found that this title seemed so appropriate for the second prelude's bell-like harmonics that he immediately subtitled the second prelude, 'Bells in Winter'."[13]

The "bell-like harmonics" referred to by Burge are created through the use of an extended technique: the pianist is required to reach inside the piano with the right hand to touch or "stop" the lowest string of the piano, while the corresponding key is played by the left hand. The resulting harmonic will vary considerably depending on where the pianist touches the string; while the composer instructs the pianist to remain seated on the piano bench, I find that on most pianos, a more satisfying resonance is achieved by standing and reaching farther inside to touch a point higher on the string. While this extended technique requires some care and forethought, its basic execution is both idiomatic and accessible, potentially making this prelude an excellent study for an intermediate student. Another pedagogical point of interest is the challenge of

[11] Those readers who frequent Rutherford library may be familiar with the bronze bust of Miłosz (1911-2004) located on the ground floor. The sculpture commemorates Miłosz's visit to the University of Alberta in 1980 – the same year he was awarded the 1980 Nobel Prize in literature.
[12] Burge, email comment to author, June 25 2016.
[13] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, ibid.

producing good tone on the nine chords that form the core of this short prelude, and teachers may find this piece useful as a musically compelling exercise in voicing and physical "follow through" gestures.

While the subtitle of the following prelude, **"Playground Games,"** might suggest a certain suitability for young students, it is in fact one of the most technically demanding of the *Twenty-Four Preludes* (despite also being among the shortest). Whereas many of the preludes sound like distant relatives of Chopin's set, the Prelude No. 3 in G Major has more in common with Béla Bartók's numerous piano miniatures. While not directly modelled on a specific work by Bartók, the jeering dissonances, jarring accents, and acerbic repeated-note motives will remind astute listeners of countless pieces from *Mikrokosmos* and the folksong-influenced *For Children* (Sz. 42). Indeed, Burge constructs much of this prelude using the same "five finger patterns" found in pedagogical repertoire, and the composer even recommends the use of such fingering in the rapidly ascending scale passages in mm. 6-7 (heard at 0:14').[14] The "punch line" of this charmingly raucous prelude arrives at m. 16 (0:46') when the right hand pierces through an impressionistic wash of sound with a single, insistent melody; this clarion call suggests the dreaded parental summons to dinner (or worse, bed) that inevitably interrupts all playground romps. Of course, the prelude cannot end with one final returning of the taunting opening motif; the right hand sneaks in the last word at the end.

If the third prelude is all fun and games, the fourth prelude is surely among the most sombre and serious of the set. **Prelude No. 4 in E Minor** immediately brings to mind Chopin's

[14] While the principle of these fingerings is sound, I found it necessary to alter the scale fingering in m. 7 in order to achieve a legato line. Incidentally, theorists may be interested to note that these scales are synthetic in nature, built out of two "major" tetrachords – arguably a further link to the language of Bartok, who flavoured his music with numerous folk modes and "hybrid" scales.

ever-popular prelude in the same key, but while Burge's work clearly shares the same interest in descending chromatic lines, it approaches the depressive affect from a more stoic standpoint. Whereas Chopin's richly expressive prelude features left hand chords pulling ever downwards against a lyrical right hand melody, Burge's prelude juxtaposes the chromatic descent with a brassy, fanfare-like melody in the middle register. This double-dotted theme struggles against the gravity of the descending line, reaching ever higher before finally succumbing to the downward pull after a climactic crescendo. The spacious, open chords that bookend Burge's prelude bring to mind the final cadence of Chopin's work, but this homage retains a strong sense of originality: both the placement of the main melodies in the tenor of the texture, and the jagged contour of the fanfare line, with its leaps of perfect fifths, are hallmarks of Burge's style.[15]

The fifth prelude, subtitled **"Linear Reverberations,"** offers respite from the intensity of the E minor prelude. Another prelude featuring extended techniques, the Prelude No. 5 in D Major is played almost entirely with the right hand, while the left hand silently depresses a cluster of notes in order to create a rich sympathetic resonance.[16] At first glance, this prelude is not overly technically challenging, but careful attention is required in order to maintain a legato line using finger substitution in the right hand. The pianist must also delineate a clear dynamic progression in the simple scalar melody, the undulating contour of which almost resembles a graphic representation of a sound wave. The challenge of maintaining and shaping a legato line is magnified in the final, lengthy phrase of the prelude, in which the right hand plays the opening melody as a two-part canon at the interval of a sixth.

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[15] Similar examples of fanfares built on fourths and fifths can be heard in *Study No. 5 "War Music"* from the *Studies in Poetry*, as well as variation five in the *Prelude Variations*, among other pieces.

[16] Burge's use of both a cluster and sympathetic vibrations brings to mind the music of American composer Henry Cowell, who experimented with these extended techniques in pieces like *Dynamic Motion* (1916).

The **Prelude No. 6 in B minor ("Off-beat Waltz")** represents a sharp departure from the meditative stasis of "Linear Reverberations." Burge explains in his publication notes that "[preludes] numbers 6, 12, 18 and 24 are sufficiently expansive that they generate a strong sense of ending which structurally groups the entire work into four blocks of six prelude subsets," and the Prelude No. 6 effectively demarcates the end of the first subset.[17] One of the most technically demanding of the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, this sixth prelude presents a paradox in its subtitle: if a waltz is "off-beat," is it still a waltz? Certainly, this is not a functional waltz suitable for dancing; rather, it follows in the tradition of Chopin's concert waltzes. Yet the impish, menacing character of this prelude is more reminiscent of the character pieces of Grieg than of Chopin's graceful waltzes. Burge's use of quixotic dynamic changes, punchy accents and articulations, and daring leaps underscore the demonic character of this prelude, and the rising "codetta" passage brings this prelude to a harrowing conclusion.

If the first six preludes are indeed viewed as a self-contained set, the **Prelude No. 7 in A Major** represents a sort of *reset*. This subtle prelude is marked *Adagietto*, a somewhat rare marking that may bring to mind the famous fourth movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 5. While there are no direct thematic links to that piece, this prelude exhibits a rich, Mahlerian lyricism created through intertwining lines. This expressive quality is not coincidental: the principal material of the prelude is described by the composer as a "five-note figure created by expanding a single pitch with its upper and lower neighbour note . . . one of the most expressive gestures in all of Western Art Music."[18] Burge is not the first creative mind to be drawn to this linear figure; the visual contour of the musical line is akin to what William Hogarth described in

[17] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, ibid.
[18] Ibid.

his 1753 treatise *Analysis of Beauty* as the "line of beauty."[19] (Avid bibliophiles will also be reminded of Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The Line of Beauty*, which describes a related pattern as an *ogee*.)[20] With these aesthetic points in mind, I attempted to emphasize the independence of the linear elements of this prelude in my recording, using at times extreme rubato to shape each line. While in some cases this results in rhythmic misalignments, I feel this is in keeping with the ever-present inspiration of Chopin, whose rubato was famously described by Liszt using the metaphor of a tree: "the wind plays in the leaves, stirs up life among them, the tree remains the same."[21] At the risk of taking too broad a view of the subject, this interpretive decision to embrace rhythmic freedom also recalls the earliest examples of the genre of the prelude, the so-called "unmeasured preludes" of early composers like Louis Couperin.

While rhythmic indulgences are perhaps permissible in the seventh prelude, no such liberties are appropriate in the **Prelude No. 8 in F-sharp Minor**. Burges cites this prelude as "perhaps the most minimalistic composition" in his output, and while it arguably features too fast a rate of harmonic change to truly qualify as an example of minimalism, its emphasis on progression through repetition and process (as opposed to more traditional thematic development) has an almost hypnotic effect.[22] This mesmerizing miniature may also reflect the influence of composer Marjan Mozetich (Burge's friend and composition colleague at Queen's University), whose musical language prioritizes rich, pattern-based textures and expressive harmonies. Whatever the idioms or inspirations, however, the Prelude No. 8 in F-sharp Minor

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[19] William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (London: W. Strahan, 1772), 52, accessed June 22, 2016, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=szQGAAAAQAAJ&dq

[20] Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty: A Novel* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 196.

[21] Quoted in David Rowland, "Chopin's tempo rubato in context" in Chopin Studies 2, ed. John Rink and Jim Samson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 211.

[22] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, ibid.

stands out as one of the true gems of the collection. Burge's unexpected use of a "stopped string" extended technique in the final measures creates an astonishing change of timbre, serving to awaken the ears of any listeners entranced by the preceding material.

The repetition of patterns is also a core feature of the **Prelude No. 9, "The Singing Clock."** The bright E major tonality of this prelude masks the treacherous nature of the *moto perpetuo* techniques employed throughout; the pianist's right hand is responsible for both "keeping the accompanimental fabric mechanically exact" and spinning the long melodic lines. It is worth noting that despite its chronometrical title, this prelude does not, in fact, mathematically correspond to the tempo of a timepiece; Burge's marking of ♩ = 180 beats per minute means that one second (i.e., 60 beats per minute) equals only three quarters of a bar. When asked about this apparent discrepancy, Burge explained that "the original title for this prelude was 'Singing on Autotune,' which provides a very clear musical metaphor for the unrelenting way that many pop singers are made to sing in tune through computer manipulation."[23] However, he "decided against this title if for no other reason than to find a title that was more immediate and universally understood."[24]

In comparison to the metronomic ebullience of "The Singing Clock," the **Prelude No. 10 in C-sharp Minor** is an altogether more sombre affair. Burge's economical use of material lends this prelude a strong sense of focus and direction; a steady melodic line – once again heard in a middle voice – is pulled forward by a halting outer pattern based on a "short-short-long" rhythmic motive. In interpreting this prelude, I have opted to slightly exaggerate the rhythmic relationships of the accompaniment pattern in order to create a more urgent sense of forward

[23] Burge, email with the author, June 25, 2016.
[24] Ibid.

motion; while this decision is arguably not substantiated by the score, it recalls the double-dotted idiom of Baroque era French overtures. If the supporting rhythms are played too literally, the extended melodic line will begin to sag, thus deflating the stately air suggested by Burge's *Adagio Maestoso* marking.

After the staid pomp of the Prelude No. 10 in C-sharp Minor, the **Prelude No. 11 in B Major** – subtitled "The Autoharp" – provides necessary relief. Like the Prelude No. 5 ("Linear Reverberations") this prelude utilizes extended techniques similar to those pioneered by Henry Cowell in his "string piano" compositions of the early twentieth century. Much like Cowell's 1923 piece *Aeolian Harp* (a work which does not accurately represent the sound of its instrumental namesake), this prelude requires the pianist to silently depress chords with the left hand, while the right hand strums the corresponding strings inside the piano. This technique roughly corresponds to the mechanism of an unusual instrument called the autoharp, a type of chorded zither once popular in bluegrass, country, and folk idioms.[25] Burge's prelude, however, does not strive to recreate Carter Family levels of autoharp virtuosity, but rather explores the delicate timbres created by the extended technique. While the effect is exquisite, it is not necessarily idiomatic: Burge even admits in the score that on some pianos, the cast iron bars of the interior frame may impede the strumming gestures, necessitating some rearrangements on the part of the performer. Burge also allows the performer to decide whether to "strum the chords upwards or downwards or even vary this motion at particular times."[26] Despite being only six measures long, this delicate prelude requires a number of interpretive decisions from the pianist.

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[25] In order to prevent confusion, it is worth noting here that a later prelude (No. 17 in A-flat Major) is subtitled "The Aeolian Harp," and this prelude also features extended techniques. However, this later prelude shares little in common with Cowell's piece of the same name. In the case of both "The Autoharp" and "The Aeolian Harp" Burge's pianistic representations of the titular instruments are more accurate than Cowell's earlier efforts.

[26] Burge, email with the author, June 25, 2016.

Like the "Off-beat Waltz" before it, the **Prelude No. 12 in G-sharp Minor** bookends another subset of six preludes, and demarcates the halfway point of the *Twenty-Four Preludes*. This maelstrom of a prelude bears the subtitle "Das Thema," referring to the four-note motive heard in the first measure (and virtually every bar thereafter). The nature of this motive (which is presented, again, in an inner voice) is important: whereas the four-note motive heard in Prelude No. 1 in C major was lyrical and expressive in its chromatic inflections, the motive in "Das Thema" is a taut, terse kernel of an idea contained within the volatile interval of an augmented second. My initial interpretation of this "thema" was that it was intended as a quotation of the first four notes of the medieval plainchant *Dies Irae* in retrograde, but when I asked the composer to elucidate his subtitle, he explained that it referred to the musical language of Beethoven's late works, many of which germinate out of pithy motives like the one used here.[27] This is by no means an isolated occurrence in Burge's compositions, which reveal an enduring fascination with such motives; one of his pedagogical pieces, an introductory-level work titled *Johann Phones Dmitri*, actually juxtaposes the musical signatures "BACH" and "DSCH."[28]

While I do not believe the motive used in "Das Thema" contains any such cryptograms, the prelude remains an outstanding example of Burge's ability to generate a substantial composition out of a minute motive. Indeed, what is most impressive about this stormy prelude is that it never wavers in its intensity, despite being one of the longest pieces in the set. The piece lasts over three tempest-tossed minutes, and neither the pianist nor the listener is offered much respite. (By comparison, Chopin's Prelude in G-sharp minor, which shares a similarly tumultuous affect, lasts a mere sixty seconds in some recordings.)

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[27] Burge, informal interview by Mathew Walton, Edmonton, May 28, 2016.
[28] Ibid., *Parking an Octatonic Truck* (Red Leaf Pianoworks, 2013), 12-13.

Following the tumult of "Das Thema," Burge allows the listener some respite with the **Prelude No. 13 in F-sharp Major**, the "One-Note Ostinato." True to its title, this lengthy prelude contains an F-sharp on every single eight-note pulse. In the hands of a less skilled composer, this obsessive level of repetition might test the patience of the listener, but Burge carefully moderates the effect by having the repeated F-sharp migrate through different voices and registers, and by employing a rich variety of harmonies in the surrounding texture. The overall effect is something like the steady patter of rainfall on a window, a metaphor which brings to mind Chopin's Prelude in D-flat Major, a piece better known by the spurious title "Raindrop Prelude." Like that piece, Burge's "One-Note Ostinato" serves as an aural palette cleanser after the intensity of "Das Thema," but it should be noted that the performer enjoys no such reprieve. The "One-Note Ostinato" is handily the most physically taxing of the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, and Burge even advises that "playing this music with a relaxed right-hand wrist is crucial to avoiding fatigue or a repetitive stress injury."[29] These risks can also be mitigated by adopting a more lyrical interpretive approach to this piece. While Burge provides a metronome marking of 169 to the dotted quarter, this marking arguably undermines the attached *poco presto* indication, and pianists who attempt to observe the ambitious metronome indication will struggle to produce a sound that is anything but harsh, unrelenting, and driven.[30] Given that Burge describes this prelude as having "a sense of 'freshness' and 'new beginnings'," I chose to take a more moderate tempo in my recording, with the aim of imitating the gentle timbre of an mbira (i.e., the African idiophone sometimes referred to as a "thumb piano").[31]

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[29] Ibid., *Twenty-Four Preludes,* inside back cover.
[30] In casual conversation (Edmonton, May 28, 2016), the composer admitted (with a twinkle in his eye) that an unnamed professional pianist declared this prelude "impossible" to play at the indicated metronome marking, and I would certainly agree with this anonymous assessment.
[31] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, ibid.

The **Prelude No. 14 in E-flat Minor** sees the return of extended techniques. In this prelude, Burge requires the pianist to play low chords with the left hand, while slapping the strings with the right, creating a bass drum-like effect. This is not the first time Burge has explored this type of effect; in his 2009 étude "War Music" from the *Studies in Poetry* (which takes its title from British poet Christopher Logue's modern reconstruction of Homer's *Iliad*), he requires the pianist to weave a piece of paper through the lowest five strings of the piano in order to create a snare drum effect.[32] Because of this similarity, I hear a distinctly martial affect in the Prelude No. 14 in E-flat Minor. An additional extended technique is employed in the final moments of this prelude, when the pianist must "scratch" specific strings with the nail of the right thumb, a somewhat difficult technique to reliably execute. The accuracy of this sliding technique can be increased by resting the side of the thumb on the string adjacent to the one being scratched, rather like using a ruler to guide a pencil. Even with such tricks, this brief prelude was difficult to record; slapping the strings with the necessary force to achieve the indicated dynamics often results in unintended rattling noises, and due to the resonant nature of the piece, it is impractical to "fix it in post" by splicing together different takes.

The concentrated intensity of the fourteenth prelude is washed away by the **Prelude No. 15 in D-flat Major, "Polytonality."** While the subtitle of this prelude might suggest an emphasis on dissonance (not least because the two keys juxtaposed – D-flat major in the left hand, and G major in the right – are a tritone apart), the slow tempo and rich chordal texture of this composition create a calm, mystical atmosphere. The prelude opens with the statement of an eighteen-measure theme, a chorale-like progression of chords that at times hints at underlying circle-of-fifths sequences. While this theme juxtaposes two independent tonalities, a moment of

[32] Burge, *Studies in Poetry V: War Music* (The Library of the Canadian Music Centre, Toronto, Ontario, 2009), 1.

unexpected resolution is reached in measure 18 (at 1:42 in this recording) when the right hand arrives at a C-sharp Major chord – the enharmonic twin of the D-flat major chord being held in the left hand. This moment can be heard as the theme "coming full circle," both in poetic and theoretical senses.

Following this initial statement of the theme, Burge explores the full spectrum of harmonies afforded by a polytonal landscape by presenting an "expanded variation on the opening eighteen bars (almost as if he is composing a 'Double' on the self-contained opening in a Baroque fashion but with the interior of each phrase getting more expansive)."[33] His colouristic use of chords is reminiscent at times of Messiaen (himself a composer of several piano preludes), while the expansive registration and use of parallel chords can be heard as a distant echo of impressionist works like Debussy's prelude *La Cathédrale engloutie*.[34] The middle of Burge's "Polytonality" builds to a dramatic climax, but it is the calm dissipation of this organ-like climax which interests me most. Specifically, in mm. 43-44 (at 4:20' in this recording), Burge arguably arrives at a moment of *pandiatonicism* – "the attempt to equalize the seven tones of the diatonic scale so that no single pitch is heard as a tone center."[35] In this crystalline moment, Burge achieves pandiatonicism by hiding the tonic pitch in an inner voice and treating all remaining notes of the home key with equal emphasis. Despite the complexity of the process, little understanding of theory is required to appreciate the calming effect of this passage: devoid of

[33] Burge, email with the author, June 25, 2016.
[34] Incidentally, "Polytonality" shares little in common with Chopin's Prelude in D-flat Major, the so-called "Raindrop" prelude. The one point of common ground is that both preludes are the longest in their respective sets, typically lasting over five minutes each.
[35] Stefan M. Kostka and Dorothy Payne, *Tonal Harmony, with an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 475.

tension, it serves to position this fifteenth piece as an oasis of calm in the midst of a series of more agitated preludes.

Agitation is an apt adjective for the **Prelude No. 16 in B-flat Minor, "The Hummingbird."** True to its title, this prelude captures the hovering flight of the tiny bird through delicate arpeggiated patterns and cascading flourishes of thirty-second notes. Despite featuring many of the technical innovations first heard in water-inspired works like Liszt's *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este* and Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, this difficult prelude represents the continuation of a well-established tradition of ornithological character pieces (ranging from Daquin's *Le Coucou* to Beach's *Hermit Thrush at Eve*). Perhaps surprisingly, though, it seems to be the first significant piano work written specifically about the hummingbird.[36]

Burge's **Prelude No. 17 in A-flat Major, "The Aeolian Harp,"** sees a return to extended techniques. As noted above, it shares little common ground with Cowell's *Aeolian Harp*, despite describing the same wind-based instrument.[37] Rather, the point of reference here is to Chopin's Étude in A-flat Major Op. 25 No. 1, a work often known by the epithet "The Aeolian Harp" due to the light broken chord figurations forming the primary technical challenge. Burge's prelude in fact mimics the opening melodic gesture of Chopin's étude, but after rising through a

[36] While Burge's prelude stands as the most virtuosic piano piece written about the hummingbird, at least two well-known composers have also been inspired by this subject. The late Romantic-era American composer Edward MacDowell included a miniature titled "To a Humming Bird" in his *6 Fancies, Op. 7*; it is a quaint composition, but insignificant. Outside of the piano literature, Ernest Chausson's song for voice and piano *Le Colibri* (Op. 2, No. 7) sets a rather saccharine love poem by Leconte de Lisle featuring an extended metaphor involving a hummingbird. Rather mercifully for the accompanying pianist, Chausson makes no attempt to mimic the dizzying flight of the bird in the piano part.

[37] That being said, the extended techniques used here by Burge do share notable similarities to those found in Cowell's innovative 1925 piece *The Banshee*. Beyond that piece (and Chopin's étude), notable musical depictions of the Aeolian harp include two vocal settings of Eduard Mörike's poem *An eine Äolsharfe* by Johannes Brahms (Op. 19 No. 5) and Hugo Wolf (*Mörike Lieder* Vol. 1, No. 11). Both songs feature relatively slow ascending arpeggios in the piano accompaniment, and the Wolf setting also includes lush rolled chords. Neither lied uses fast piano figurations or extended techniques, however. (My thanks to Dr. David Gramit for reminding me of these gems of the lieder repertoire.)

series of lush arpeggiated chords, the piece introduces a novel effect by having the performer strum the piano strings with the back of the hands. By placing these harp-like interludes in different registers, Burge successfully suggests the unusual sounds of the titular instrument. Inevitably, these extended techniques create certain challenges and inconsistencies, and due to the varying designs of the cast iron frame inside different pianos, the pianist must thoroughly test any unfamiliar instrument in order to ascertain "which way the wind blows." The Steinway model used in this recording, for example, features an unusually large gap between two sets of strings in the middle register, with the result that the pianist must slightly increase the velocity of the strumming gesture in order to avoid a "hiccup" in the sound.

Although the **Prelude No. 18 in F Minor** brings to a close the third subset of preludes, according to the composer, it was also the last to be composed of the entire cycle of twenty-four. Like several of the earlier pieces, this untitled prelude prominently features a four-note motive. Consisting of three repeated notes followed by a downward leap of a major third, this cell may be heard as a distant, twitchy relative of the famous "fate knocking at the door" motive that permeates Beethoven's fifth symphony. Beyond this motivic resemblance and a shared minor modality, however, this prelude has little in common with that masterwork, eschewing heroic gravitas in favour of mercurial mischievousness. Indeed, this highly syncopated prelude could be appropriately nicknamed the "Off-Beat Tango," not least because it shares the impetuous character of the earlier "Off-Beat Waltz" (i.e., Prelude No. 6 in B Minor). Such personal interpretations aside, this prelude is one of the most satisfying to perform due to the surprising changes in articulation and dramatic dynamic contrasts.

**Prelude No. 19 in E-flat Major** represents the start of the final subset of preludes, and while this group shows no signs of a rushed compositional schedule, the subtitle "Deadlines"

aptly describes the precipitous pace of this prelude. Plunging headlong through interlocking combinations of broken chords, this piece soon arrives at a quirky theme in a high register. Featuring a sequential treatment of a four-note melody ornamented by descending figurations, this theme brings to mind the sprightly, ephemeral nature of music associated with circus scenes. Certainly, this prelude flies by at a dizzying rate, and only the most daring (or foolhardy) pianist will not be caught breathless by the end.

Burge's decision to write "Deadlines" in a breathless *moto perpetuo* character stands in stark contrast to the traditional "Heroic" affect associated with the E-flat major tonality, but in the following Prelude No. 20, he fully embraces the "tragic" associations of the key of C minor. Another piece showcasing extended techniques, the **Prelude No. 20 in C Minor** tasks the pianist with tapping, knocking, and slapping various parts of the piano. Composed according to a "strong procedural element," this stark piece places a solid chord on the downbeat of each measure, arguably the only point of contact with Chopin's famous Prelude in C minor.[38] Following this chord, the pianist uses the left hand to percussively perform a rhythm, while the right hand plays a countermelody consisting of (once again) four notes. The nature of the percussive attack varies, and Burge also leaves room for the performer to choose to tap with a ring instead of bare knuckles. Yet while wearing a ring does make many of the tapping techniques more audible, it also complicates the extended techniques which involve slapping the side and underside of the piano, since the occasional contact of the ring during a slap may result in an inconsistent sound. While recording this prelude, then, I learned to quickly remove and

[38] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, ibid. While it may seem odd that Burge does not reference one of Chopin's most popular preludes, it should be remembered that he wrote a twenty-five minute set of variations on this piece in his *Prelude Variations for Piano and Orchestra*, a work I enjoyed the privilege of performing in 2014 with the University of Alberta Symphony Orchestra under the baton of maestro Petar Dundjerski.

replace the ring during pauses between attacks – a rather risky maneuver that resulted in numerous ruined takes. Burge, who wears a large wedding band himself, "only uses the upper portion of his fingers" when executing the slapping, but notes that "of course this does not create that loud an effect."[39]

Burge contrasts the severe, serious character of the C minor prelude with one of the most exquisite works in the set, the **Prelude No. 21 in B-flat Major**. This prelude is perhaps best heard as a pair with the twenty-second prelude (in the relative minor mode of G minor), since both pieces begin with the same distinctive harmony, a half-diminished seventh chord. Famed for its use in Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, this chord carries a uniquely ethereal quality; it hangs in the air, unable to settle on a resolution.[40] Referring to the orchestral prelude to that music drama, English comedian and cultural commentator Stephen Fry notes that the music "keeps you on the edge of your seat, longing for the unbearable tension of those opening chords to be resolved" a description equally applicable to the opening bars of Burge's Prelude No. 21 in B-flat Major.[41] Burge follows the voice-leading tendencies of this chord to unfurl outwards, and the whole prelude can be heard as a gradual process of contrapuntal expansion and contraction between statements of the opening harmony, which reappears on the downbeats of the fourth, seventh, eleventh, and fifteenth measures.[42] Theoretical considerations aside, this prelude is a

[39] Ibid., email with the author, June 25, 2016.
[40] *Pace*, theorists and Wagnerites – I freely admit that the "Tristan Chord" exists in a specific context and features unique voice-leading principals distinguishing it from a "common" half-diminished seventh chord (Burge does it better, anyway . . . ).
[41] Stephen Fry and Patrick McGrady, *Wagner & Me* (New York, NY: First Run Features, 2011).
[42] Incidentally, this voice leading approximately mirrors the expanding contour of the accompanying pattern in Chopin's Prelude in B-flat Major, though Chopin's piece is not based on a half-diminished seventh harmony.

delicate study in expressive counterpoint and limpid tone colours, and like an artist's watercolour set, it invites the player to explore the timbral possibilities of the instrument.[43]

If the Prelude No. 21 in B-flat Major is likened to a watercolour, the subsequent **Prelude No. 22 in G Minor** must be compared to a hard-edged charcoal line drawing. As noted above, these two preludes are best served together, since both pieces begin with the same half-diminished seventh chord (albeit heard in broken form in the second prelude). However, even listeners with acutely trained ears may be excused for missing this connection, given that the opening notes of the Prelude No. 22 in G Minor fly by at a ferocious speed. Indeed, the entire prelude is a driven, relentless study in a predominantly sinuous, sinewy texture: for much of the piece, the hands play the same notes, one octave apart. In this regard, this prelude is reminiscent of the *Presto* finale of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 35 (the "Funeral March"), a harrowing movement which has been likened to the image of wind gusting through a graveyard. That whirlwind sonata movement is occasionally played "party trick" exercise, with the questionable goal of tearing through the seventy-five measures in under sixty seconds (a "feat" allegedly achieved by Lazar Berman, according to apocryphal anecdotes) – approximately the duration of Burge's prelude. While I by no means advocate subjecting this relentless little prelude to such abuse, I have no doubt that other, more fleet-fingered pianists will be able to shave off a few seconds from my own one-minute recording.

In comparison to the irresistible force of the G minor prelude, the **Prelude No. 23 in F Major, "Spring Thaw"** is the proverbial immovable object, at least in its opening section. Burge explains that the title of this prelude is a tribute to Canadian poet Margaret Avison, whose

[43] Incidentally, one of Burge's earliest published piano works is a 1994 piece called *Watercolour*. A charming, impressionistic character piece, it reveals Burge's longstanding command of the instrument, but perhaps pales in comparison to the subtlety and refinement of the Prelude in question.

"poetry often drew spiritual significance from the changing of the seasons."[44] This seasonal cycle is suggested by the ABA structure of this prelude, which opens with a slow section best described as a study in stasis. In this section, the left hand plays a meandering, steady line of expanding intervals, against which the right hand plucks strings in the highest register of the piano. Mercifully, Burge notates only the contour of this plucked line, rather than forcing the pianist to search for specific strings. I believe this emphasis on timbre over pitch is significant: the plucked strings sound to me like ice cracking as it melts. Following this interpretation, the subsequent fast descending pattern heard in m. 10 (at 1:13' in this recording) might be heard as a moment of transformation as the ice begins to melt and trickles downward as water. (Rather symbolically from the pianist's perspective, this moment may also coincide with an increase of circulation to the right arm, which often becomes numb due to the necessity of leaning the forearm against the keyboard lid while plucking the high strings.) This sequential passage signals the beginning of the B section, and as the music progresses, the "trickle of meltwater" music grows into a jubilant torrent heralding the return of spring.[45] Yet as every Canadian knows, to celebrate the end of winter is to tempt fate, and after reaching an ecstatic climax, the music is subjected to the chilling effect of a *ritardando* leading to the return of the icy opening material. As the prelude comes to an end, the left hand freezes on a chord, leaving the right hand to pluck four final notes, and relinquishing the audience to winter's grasp.

Considering the frosty conclusion of the previous prelude, it is tempting to view the stormy **Prelude No. 24 in D Minor ("Le Fini")** as a sort of King Lear-ian tirade against the

[44] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, inside back cover. Avison, aside from arguably being Canada's third most familiar writer named Margaret, is a frequent source of inspiration for Burge, who has referenced her words in his choral, vocal, and instrumental works (including *Everything Waits for the Lilacs*, *No Time*, *Sunblue*, and *One Sail*, among others).

[45] Happily, no human sacrifice required.

elements. The subtitle "Le Fini" is appropriate not only because this is the last prelude in Burge's set, but because it also contains a link to Chopin's own closing Prelude in D minor. In his publication notes, Burge reminds us that "Chopin's Preludes end with three, very strongly accented low D's" and goes on to explain that Burge "shifts this around by starting ["Le Fini"] with these same three notes."[46] These resonant notes may also be heard as recalling the "Bells in Winter" of the now distant second prelude, which repeated the piano's low A three times, a link which Burge cleverly identifies as "a very long-term dominant to tonic resolution if ever there was one."[47] Indeed, the motoric nature of the Prelude No. 24 in D Minor may lead the listener to speculate that Burge was inspired by the notable literature of toccatas written in the key of D minor – Prokofiev's hair-raising Op. 11 toccata and Bach's organ Toccata and Fugue BWV 565 spring to mind. Regardless of such associations, "Le Fini" is an unabashedly passionate prelude, written in a late-Romantic idiom typical of composers like Rachmaninoff (consider, for example, that composer's bell-tolling Prelude in B-flat Major, Op. 23 No. 2). By freely using lush chromatic inflections, a thick chordal texture spread across a wide register, and chains of harmonic mediant progressions,[48] Burge furnishes the performer with the materials necessary to bring the *Twenty-Four Preludes* to a conclusion that is both emotionally and acoustically powerful. Further, "like the final Chopin D Minor Prelude, the Burge Prelude in the same key seems to take as its *modus operandi* the exploration of as many tonalities as possible which is an insular way of encapsulating the complete work's focus on all twenty-four distinctive keys."[49] The piece ends with three *fortissimo possible* chords spanning five octaves, each containing a D

[46] Burge, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, ibid.
[47] Ibid., email with the author, June 25, 2016.
[48] Roughly, the same type of expressive harmonic progressions frequently found in works ranging from verismo operas and Mahler symphonies to more adventurous (and amorous) pop song choruses.
[49] Burge, email with the author, June 25 2016.

in the lowest voice – the final evolution, perhaps, of the prelude's stark opening quotation of Chopin's last notes.

Having exhaustively examined the individual preludes (my thanks to the patient peruser), it is now worth briefly "stepping back" to consider the *Twenty-Four Preludes* as a whole entity. Several questions must be considered: does Burge connect or unify the preludes, and if so, how? Do the *Twenty-Four Preludes* need to be performed as a cycle, or can they be performed individually or in small groups? Finally, what is the significance or value of this composition within the wider repertoire?

Regarding the topic of unity within the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, readers may have noticed the recurrence of several common traits in the preceding discussion of individual preludes. For example, several preludes (e.g., Nos. 1, 4, 10, and 12) employ a distinctive texture in which the melody is heard in an inner "tenor" voice. There is some crossover between these preludes, and preludes featuring a fanfare-like melodic line (i.e., material emphasizing brassy articulations, punchy rhythms, and often featuring "open" intervals like fourths and fifths); Burge uses this effect in Preludes Nos. 2, 4, 10, 12, 15 and even briefly in 16. Yet while these "tenor" and "fanfare" elements can be heard in multiple preludes, it is more accurate to hear them as hallmarks of Burge's compositional voice, rather than as explicit links between preludes.[50] The same can be said of Burge's frequent preference for regular, symmetrical phrase structures, as displayed in Preludes Nos. 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 13, 19 and 24. Perhaps more distinctive trend heard across several preludes is Burge's persistent use of four-note motives (often as melodic material),

[50] Some years ago I had the pleasure of taking a course in Canadian music taught by Robert Cram at the University of Ottawa. Discussing contemporary composers, he argued that the mark of a great composer is that you can almost instantly discern their distinctive "voice" upon hearing a new work. It strikes me as a measure of Burge's talent and craft that his compositional voice is, at least to me, nearly always immediately recognizable.

such as those heard in Preludes Nos. 1, 8, 12, 18, 19, and 20. In all of these cases, however, the motives are different, and do not explicitly construct bridges between individual preludes. As suggested earlier, the use of four-note motives can be recognized as a compositional trait in many of Burge's works, and for this reason, should not be heard as a unifying trait in the *Twenty-Four Preludes*.

To be clear, the apparent lack of clear thematic links between preludes does not represent any sort of shortcoming in the *Twenty-Four Preludes*. Recalling Charles Rosen's comments on the "radical," disconnected nature of Chopin's Op. 28 preludes, it strikes me that part of the appeal of the twenty-four prelude "cycle" as a genre is that it provides the opportunity for composers to juxtapose strikingly contrasting miniatures which, presented in isolation, might risk being overlooked within a composer's catalogue of works. This observation does, of course, lead to another question: should non-unified sets of preludes like those by Chopin and Burge be performed in their entirety, or is it acceptable (or even preferable) to present individual pieces or curated groupings in performance? In the case of Chopin, pianists today typically perform the Preludes, Op. 28 as a complete set, but according to scholars, this may not have been the composer's intent. Marilyn Anne Meier reminds us that "we know from reviews of Chopin's concerts that he never played the complete Op. 28 in public" and that he never performed more than four preludes in one sitting.[51] (It should be remembered, however, that Chopin's frail health and limited stamina likely influenced his programming decisions; performing the Op. 28 Preludes as a whole remains a physically taxing proposition for any pianist.)

[51] Marilyn Anne Meier, *Chopin twenty-four preludes opus 28* (Doctor of Creative Arts Thesis, University of Wollongong, 1993), 67.

As for Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes*, there is a complicating factor: while there may be few overt thematic links between preludes, the pieces are organized according to a careful plan.[52] In the following Table 1 (kindly provided for this paper by the composer), Burge highlights the pattern of preludes featuring extended techniques:

**Table 1:** Systematic Arrangement of Preludes Using Extended Instrumental Techniques

1-6 | 7-12 | 13-18 | 19-24

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | 3 | 4 | | 6 | 7 | | 9 | 10 | | 12 | 13 | | 15 | 16 | | 18 | 19 | | 21 | 22 | | 24 |
| | 2 | | | 5 | | | 8 | | | 11 | | | 14 | | | 17 | | | 20 | | | 23 | |

*Preludes on the bottom line have extended instrumental techniques*

Explaining this table, Burge notes that

> The arc-like arrangement of having both the second prelude and second-last prelude use extended techniques creates a strong sense of balance throughout the set of preludes. Equally, the deployment of the extended technique preludes occurring in every third prelude (2, 5, 8, 11, etc.) means that these preludes alternate major and minor modes. Finally, the idea that the set can easily be played in groups of six preludes (1-7, 7-12, 13-18 and 19-24) is further supported by the fact that within each subset of six, the second and second-last prelude uses extended techniques.[53]

As the sectional divisions outlined above may suggest, the composer himself has indicated his openness to different performance options. Indeed, the preludes were premiered by the composer himself "a few at a time" over the set's "long period of gestation" from 2011-2015.[54] While leaving choices of "pairings" up to the performer, Burge reminds pianists that "many of the consecutively numbered preludes sharing the same key signature have a natural connection and

[52] As Dr. Jacques Després insightfully notes, the palindromic arrangement of Burge's preludes brings to mind Bartok's penchant for formal symmetry.
[53] Burge, email with the author, June 25, 2016.
[54] Burge, "Twenty-Four Preludes - Piano Solo (2015)," JohnBurge.ca, accessed June 22, 2016, https://johnburge.ca/item/view/140

flow easily one into the other." Another effective approach would be to program any of the "subsets" of six preludes (i.e., Nos. 1-6, 7-12, 13-18, and 19-24) that Burge alludes to in his notes; each of these groupings has an effective structural arch, as well as variety of character and technique. Finally, many of the preludes (particularly the longer pieces) could be performed as standalone works, though I tend to agree with the composer's recommendation that "it is always stronger to play two contrasting preludes to demonstrate a performer's musicianship and technical facility."[55]

In cases where the pianist chooses to perform the entire set of twenty-four preludes, certain challenges must be considered. As with any large-scale work, the performer is tasked with making sense of both the overall architecture of the music, as well as the numerous contrasts within the piece. In this regard, Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes* present a special challenge, particularly when compared to other, similarly extended compositions. For example, considered as a whole, Burge's preludes are significantly longer than Chopin's (with performances potentially lasting approximately 60 minutes and 35 minutes, respectively), meaning that the performer must hold the audience's attention for a longer period of time. This challenge is magnified by the fact that many of Burge's individual preludes feature considerable thematic or motivic development, whereas many of Chopin's preludes (as mentioned earlier) showcase a fleeting, mercurial idea without pausing for extensive development. While both musical styles present challenges for the performer, it is arguably more difficult to hold an audience's attention through repertoire based on the development of musical ideas. On the other hand, because Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes* do not feature the kind of complex and strict organizational techniques found in other works of similar duration (for approximate example,

[55] Ibid.

Bach's *Goldberg Variations* or Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*), and instead feature considerable and frequent contrast between preludes, the performer must carefully consider how to hold on to the audience's attention while "changing gears" between pieces. Again, these comparisons are not intended to carry value judgements, but simply to draw attention to the unique challenges facing pianists performing Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes* for a live audience.

Having considered John Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes* on both individual and macrocosmic levels, the task remains of evaluating the significance of this new work. While my own personal connections to this music have undoubtedly obscured my objectivity, I do believe these preludes are a significant contribution not only to the landscape of contemporary Canadian piano music, but also to the larger piano repertoire with its tradition of prelude cycles. Notably, the scope of this work is significant, since relatively few contemporary composers of piano music seem inclined toward writing extended works or sets of pieces, preferring often to compose self-contained character pieces.[56] Moreover, Burge may be considered in the context of the long tradition of "performer composers"; while his primary focus is composition, Burge is an excellent (if humble) pianist, and his deep understanding of the instrument is immediately apparent to any pianist approaching his music. Perhaps because of Burge's considerable pianistic abilities – he typically premieres his own piano works – the *Twenty-Four Preludes* are consistently idiomatic in every regard. Not only do they highlight the various strengths of the modern grand piano, but they also fit comfortably within the well-trained pianist's technique.[57]

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[56] There are, of course, many exceptions to this broad generalization. For example, Lera Auerbach (b. 1973) composed a set of 24 Preludes (Op. 41) in 1999 (with credit to Dr. James Douglass for drawing this work to my attention).

[57] Somewhat ironically, the same cannot always be said of other works within the standard piano repertoire. Rachmaninoff's preludes, for example, are notoriously difficult for pianists with average or small hands, while many of Chopin's intricate figurations (such as those found throughout the preludes) are difficult or awkward to

With the exception of the extended techniques, and a few especially challenging sections such as much of the *One-Note Ostinato*, the materials used by Burge in the *Twenty-Four Preludes* are both comfortable and effective, and do not require the experienced pianist to invest heavily in developing new techniques or unfamiliar muscle memories. This idiomatic quality is another aspect that contributes to the significance of this work, since it makes the music more attractive and accessible to pianists (particularly in comparison to much of the concert-level piano music being composed today).

The fact that Burge's *Twenty-Four Preludes* are so consistently idiomatic also greatly increases their pedagogical application. Although these notes have devoted only a few sentences to the pedagogical value of various pieces from the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, teachers of both intermediate and advanced pianists with find many useful gems in this set, particularly in regards to the introduction of effective but unthreatening extended techniques. The largely accessible musical language of these preludes may also serve as an excellent gateway to Canadian repertoire to pianists who might otherwise by reluctant to explore this wonderful area of contemporary music.

It is my hope that these program notes will have piqued the good reader's curiosity enough to inspire repeated hearings of the *Twenty-Four Preludes*, so that critical discourse on this music may develop beyond my own biased assessments. More importantly, though, I hope that other pianists will grace these preludes with their own interpretive insights in future performances and recordings, and in so doing, continue to secure Burge's place in the piano repertoire.

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play, despite their musical effectiveness. (Of course, such difficulties are often mitigated when this music is played on appropriate period instruments.)

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