

Discovering Previously Overlooked Sets of Piano Compositions

*in 24 Major and Minor Keys by Four Russian
Composers at the Turn of the 20th Century*

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Abstract

At the turn of the 20th century, Russian composers Felix Blumenfeld, Anton Arensky, César Cui, and Reinhold Glière crafted sets of piano character pieces, notably the 24 Preludes op. 17 (1892), 24 *Morceaux caractéristiques* op. 36 (1894), 25 *Préludes* op. 64 (1903), and 25 *Preludes* op. 30 (published in 1906 - 1908), respectively. Blumenfeld mirrors the tonal organization of Chopin's 24 Preludes, op. 28, while Arensky and Glière draw inspiration from Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Cui innovatively differs from Chopin's scheme by sequencing minor key works before relative major ones. Both Cui and Glière's sets encompass 25 preludes, concluding with an additional piece in C major. Each collection exhibits distinct traits, harmonizing Western Romantic tradition with Russian nationalistic elements. This exploration provides insights into tonal structures, influences, and cyclic performances, spotlighting the distinctive character of these lesser-known yet captivating piano compositions.

Keywords: Blumenfeld, Arensky, Cui, Glière, Late Romanticism, Russian Piano Music

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Introduction

In the rich tapestry of musical history, composers have explored the possibilities presented by creating sets of pieces encompassing all 24 major and minor keys. Notably, Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Books I and II and Frédéric Chopin's 24 Preludes op. 28 exemplify early instances of such exploration. Sergei Rachmaninoff continued this tradition, crafting his own set of Preludes over 18 years, showcasing all major and minor keys in a seemingly random order. My recent performance of Rachmaninoff's Preludes as a cyclic work sparked a fascination with how composers organize 24 keys and how effective they are when performed as a cycle. This article delves into the lesser-known yet captivating piano compositions in all major and minor keys by four Russian composers: Felix Blumenfeld's "24 Preludes op. 17," Anton Arensky's "24 *Morceaux caractéristiques* op. 36," César Cui's "25 *Préludes* op. 64," and Reinhold Glière's "25 Preludes op. 30."

Methodology

The primary aim is to analyze the tonal organization and compositional style of the four above-mentioned sets, by Blumenfeld, Arensky, Cui, and Glière. The overarching research question is to identify originalities within each set and explore potential influences, including the impact of other composers' works. First, researching the four composers involves a comprehensive exploration of their musical careers, from early training to stylistic evolution, and examining connections and friendships with other artists to unveil external influences. This approach aims to uncover their unique artistic expressions, offering insights into the broader context of their works. Secondly, this study employs a comparative approach to explore the tonal schemes across the 24 major and minor keys used by each composer. Additionally, it assesses potential inter-composer influences and evaluates the effectiveness of each set to perform as a cycle. This research elucidates the unique tonal and stylistic decisions of these composers, contributing to the broader discourse on the evolution of Russian piano music. Employing an analytical framework, the study reveals the intricacies of these piano pieces, offering a nuanced perspective on their tonal organization, influences, and overall effectiveness as cyclic works.

Literature Review

Amy Kay Mercer's DMA dissertation "Overlooked but Not Forgotten: A Study of Felix Blumenfeld (1863–1931) and His Twenty-Four Preludes, Op. 17 (1892) for Piano"¹ provides an overview of Blumenfeld's life and piano works and an analysis of his 24 Preludes op. 17 as well as an interesting comparison of the preludes with Chopin's Preludes op. 28. Alina Sorokina's writing "A man of a rare charm: Anton Arensky's Life Between Conservatory and Pothouse"² includes valuable information on his life. Ingrid Bols, in his article "Anton Arensky and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia,"³ discusses Arensky as one of a new generation of Russian composers after "The Mighty Five," who combined Russian music with a more cosmopolitan Western composition style. Raymond Teele Ryder's dissertation on Cui examines several of Cui's piano works including three from his 25 *Préludes* op. 64 in the context of Russian musical elements. Sunjoo Lee's dissertation "A Stylistic Analysis of Reinhold Glière's 25 Preludes for Piano, Op. 30"⁴ provides an extensive analytical study on Glière's 25 Preludes op. 30 as well as brief biographical information about the composer and a history of the prelude as a compositional genre. Matthew J. Roy's thesis includes a chapter discussing the historical development of the prelude set, which offers helpful information for this study. Eric Gilbert Beuermann's DMA dissertation "The Evolution of the Twenty-Four Prelude Set for Piano"⁵ is a thorough study

on the chronological development of the prelude set and key organization of 46 prelude sets, including those of Blumenfeld, Cui, and Glière.

Twenty-Four Preludes op. 17 by Felix Blumenfeld

The Composer

Felix Blumenfeld descended from Austrian and Polish families and had musical connections in his extended family. The Polish composer Karol Szymanowski was Felix's distant cousin, and the well-known pianist and teacher Heinrich Neuhaus was his nephew. At the St. Petersburg Conservatory, in addition to studying composition under Rimsky-Korsakov, Blumenfeld also studied piano with Fiodor Stein, who had personally known Chopin and Robert Schumann and had been particularly influenced by Chopin, a connection which in turn greatly influenced Blumenfeld's development as a musician. Blumenfeld graduated from the Conservatory with a gold medal in piano in 1885.⁶ He taught piano there between 1885 and 1918 while also serving as conductor of the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, where he conducted the Russian première of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1899).⁷ Blumenfeld was an active and prominent figure in the musical life of St. Petersburg, and he frequently attended the "Fridays" (weekly salons) organized by Mitrofan Petrovich Belaieff, a music publisher and promotor of Russian music.⁸ According to Mercer's dissertation, Rachmaninoff was invited to play at a Belaieff "Friday" and played his new Fantasy for two pianos, op. 5 (1893) by memory while Blumenfeld played the other part "superlatively at sight."⁹ Blumenfeld worked in close contact with Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninoff, and Anton Rubinstein, who was a pianist, composer, and conductor, and who founded the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Blumenfeld's performing style, influenced by Rubinstein's, was heroically brilliant and lyrically melodious; he gave the first performances of many piano works by his contemporary composers, including Arensky.¹⁰ As a well-known teacher, Blumenfeld taught countless students, such as his nephew Neuhaus, Simon Barere, Maria Yudina, Maria Grinberg, and perhaps the best known of them all, Horowitz.¹¹ Grinberg recalls that "My first teacher was Felix Blumenfeld, a prominent concert pianist, an astounding musician... Being a conductor, he heard the piano as an orchestra, and taught his students how to 'orchestrate' piano music in their interpretations."¹² Blumenfeld emphasized color and orchestral qualities in piano music not only in his teaching but also in his piano compositions. In her dissertation, Mercer concludes, "His musical activities influenced his compositions, especially conducting as it affected how he thought about music. As a result, his piano compositions have an orchestral feel to them with thick textures and opportunities for a variety of sounds and colors."¹³

Blumenfeld completed 24 Preludes op. 17 in 1892. (In the same year, Rachmaninoff wrote the famous Prelude in c-sharp minor, op. 3 no. 2.) The collection was first published in 1895 by Belaieff, and at least one edition (ca. 1897) was published with the title page reading *Preambules dans tous les tons* (Preludes in all shades [colors]). He indicated interpretive tempo markings, including in Prelude no. 1, marked *Andante religioso*, and in no. 14, marked *Andante maestoso e lugubre*. Prelude no. 18 is subtitled "Memento mori" ("Remember you must die"), while no. 20 has a motto – a quotation from Nikolaus Lenau's *Schilflieder*, reflecting the stormy and desperate mood of the prelude.¹⁴

Tonal Scheme

The 24 Preludes op. 17 follow the same tonal scheme as Chopin's Preludes op. 28 (1835-1839); the work starts in C major and then, pairing each piece with its relative minor key, moves up following the circle of fifths, that is, C–am–G–em ... Bb–gm–F–dm. Prelude no. 1 in C major, marked *Andante religioso*, opens the set quietly and calmly in chorale-like chordal texture. Interestingly, Blumenfeld had a certain perception of how the key of a piece affects its character, stating C major being full of courage and good spirits.¹⁵ As for the total sequence of the 24 Preludes, the pairs of relative major and minor keys are obviously connected smoothly with two linking tones, for instance, C–E in a C-major chord at the end of no. 1 to C–E in an a-minor chord at the opening of no. 2. Another pair of relative keys – no. 9 in E major and no. 10 in c-sharp minor – seem particularly well bounded by the use of repeated chords at the end of no. 9 and the beginning of no. 10 as well as the use of short motives with Russian flavor. The other relative-key pair of no. 21 in B-flat major and no. 22 in g minor is closely related in the broken-chord accompaniment in the right hand.

Chopin's Influence

Roy observes that the set reflects a strong Chopinesque influence in style, tonality, and form; he highlights commonalities in the preludes in f minor of both composers in the use of recitative-like chromatic melodies with chordal accompaniment and the 23rd Prelude in F major in the combination of left-hand melodies and right-hand accompaniment employing an added-6th harmony.¹⁶ Beuermann points out similarities between preludes in the same key, suggesting that Blumenfeld may have used Chopin's op. 28 as a direct model for his own op. 17. Beuermann compares the fourth preludes in e minor of both composers as an example; in each, an unchanging, rhythmic accompaniment pattern appears with a long, slow melody in stepwise motion.¹⁷ Chopin's influence is apparent in Prelude no. 7 in A major, which has chordal patterns in the right hand, reminding us of Chopin's Etude op. 10 no. 7 and the coda of the Ballade No. 2 in F major, op. 38. Prelude no. 12 in g-sharp minor begins with eighth-note triplets in both hands in unison in the low–middle registers of the piano marked *pp mezza voce*, recalling the *sotto voce e legato* opening of the finale movement of Chopin's Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, op. 35. The intense, perpetual chordal texture and the brilliant closing with a sweeping ascending scale in Blumenfeld's Prelude no. 24 in d minor may recall Chopin's Prelude op. 28 no. 12 in g-sharp minor and Etude op. 25 no. 11 in a minor; however, Blumenfeld's texture is much thicker, more orchestral, and more virtuosic. Mercer observes that Blumenfeld's treatment of texture combined with rhythmic complexity generally results in a higher level of virtuosity than in Chopin's preludes.¹⁸

I noticed a connection between Prelude no. 4 in e minor (Figure 1) and the opening of Schumann's Sonata in f-sharp minor, op. 11 (Figure 2) in the arpeggiated up–down–up accompaniment pattern and a slow, sustained melody with an anacrusis in a long phrase.



Figure 1. Felix Blumenfeld, Prelude op. 17 no. 4, b. 1-8. Source: Belaieff.



Figure 2. Robert Schumann, Sonata op. 11, first movement, b. 1-5. Source: Breitkopf & Härtel.

Prelude no. 17 in A-flat major has a lyrical, soaring theme in ascending motion, which may have influenced Rachmaninoff's Prelude op. 23 no. 8 in the same key. The opening theme of Prelude no. 19 in E-flat major (Figure 3) appears to have borrowed the final aria “Liebestod” from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. As mentioned earlier, Blumenfeld was the conductor who gave the Russian première of the opera in 1899. He must have been acquainted with Liszt’s transcription of the aria, *Isolde’s Liebestod* (1867, revised in 1875) (Figure 4), by the time of composing this prelude.



Figure 3. Felix Blumenfeld, Prelude op. 17 no. 19, b. 1-8. Source: Belaieff.



Figure 4. Franz Liszt, *Isolde's Liebestod*, from Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, b. 5–8. Source: Dover.

The three consecutive preludes, marked by the subtitle "Memento mori" in no. 18, the inclusion of *Liebestod* in no. 19, and the poignant motto by Lenau in no. 20, appear to share thematic ties, collectively exploring the profound concepts of death, love, and despair. Moreover, the following Prelude no. 21 in B-flat major, marked *Andante tranquillo*, shares similarities with Liszt's "Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude" from *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* with both texture and the religious and introspective character. Therefore, those four preludes from no. 18 to no. 21 may be meant to be performed successively, as a group.

Chromaticism, one of the significant characteristics of the late Romantic era of Western music, is seen in Preludes 4, 12, 15, 18, and 24. Only a few of them reflect Russian nationalistic character. As for texture, more than half of the preludes are very thick and orchestral with deep bass lines and large arpeggiated chords. Most of the preludes have their own distinctive rhythmic motives and patterns, in contrast to the preceding and following ones (except for 16th-note rhythms in nos. 7 and 8 and three eighth-note rhythms in nos. 10, 11, and 12.) All but three preludes (nos. 6, 9, and 24) begin softly, and many of them feature a lyrical opening theme in romantic style building to a passionate middle section with abundant colorful harmonies and modulations. The piano writing is highly virtuosic, reflecting the composer as a great pianist. The entire performance time of the 24 Preludes is about 50 minutes. Mercer states that the characters of the first and last preludes suggest that Blumenfeld may have intended the 24 Preludes to be performed as a set. I agree with her by adding one observation of an apparently meaningful sequence in Preludes 18–21 suggesting death, love, despair, and tranquility.

Twenty-four *Morceaux Caractéristiques* op. 36 by Anton Arensky

The Composer

Anton Arensky, two years older than Blumenfeld, was born in Novgorod. His father, a doctor, was a keen cellist, and his mother an excellent pianist who gave him his first music lessons. By the age of nine he had already composed some songs and piano pieces.²⁰ After his parents discovered his latent musical talent, the family moved to St. Petersburg (1879), where he studied counterpoint, harmony, composition, and instrumentation with Rimsky-Korsakov at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.²¹ Blumenfeld was one of Arensky's classmates and remained a close colleague. In 1882, Arensky graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatory with a gold medal in piano and composition; Tchaikovsky awarded him the highest grade for his graduation harmony exam.²² Then Arensky went straight to the Moscow Conservatory as a professor of harmony and counterpoint; among his pupils were

to be Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and Glière.²³ Glière remembered Arensky as “not an ordinary teacher who must ... prepare [his students] for the exam, but a true artist, an exceptionally gifted composer, deeply appreciated and loved not only by the public, but also by the best musicians of that time.”²⁴ Arensky met Tchaikovsky for the first time in 1883.²⁵ Arensky’s career was curiously parallel to that of Tchaikovsky, who, 16 years previously, as a recent alumnus of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, had been invited to teach at the Moscow Conservatory. Tchaikovsky remained a mentor and a great supporter of his younger colleague and evidently had a major influence on his compositions.²⁶ Beginning in 1888, besides his work at the Moscow Conservatory, Arensky held the position of director of the Russian Choral Society and gained a deep knowledge of vocal texture, mastering the style of Orthodox Church music.²⁷

Mily Balakirev founded “The Mighty Five” with Alexander Borodin, Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Modest Mussorgsky. Their aim was to follow in Mikhail Glinka’s footsteps and create a distinctly Russian school of music.²⁸ Since many of them taught at the St. Petersburg Conservatory the institution became famous for nationalistic style and harmonies inspired by folk music, while the Moscow Conservatory was considered to be more cosmopolitan. It was Tchaikovsky who blurred the line between nationalistic music and foreign influence by combining folk-inspired melodies with his Western Romantic style of composition. Arensky also integrated features of Russian folklore and Orthodox Church music in his compositions, and he showed that in music Russian nationalism and cosmopolitanism can cohabit without major antagonism.²⁹

The 24 *Morceaux Caractéristiques* op. 36 was composed in 1894³⁰ and first published by P. Jurgenson.³¹ Prior to this set Arensky had given titles in French to his compositions in opp. 19, 25, 30, and 34. Even with the rise of nationalism the French language continued to predominate in the names of keyboard pieces in 19th-century Russia because of its social cachet, which led publishers to hope it would attract the all-important market of young ladies.³² Arensky’s student Rachmaninoff wrote his *Morceaux de Fantaisie* op. 3 in 1892 and dedicated it to Arensky.

Tonal Scheme and Titles

The set of Arensky’s op. 36 is organized in an ascending chromatic order of keys with pairs of parallel major and minor pieces, starting with C major and c minor and moving up a semitone chromatically, that is, C–cm–C#–c#m ... Bb–bbm–B–bm, just as J. S. Bach had done in his *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. All 24 pieces have titles; some of them bear French titles and others have typical titles for character pieces used by 19th-century composers like Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Liszt. In order, the titles are “Prélude,” “La toupee” (“Spinning Top”), “Nocturne,” “Petite ballade,” “Consolation,” “Duo,” “Valse,” “In modo antico,” “Papillon,” “Ne m’oubliez pas” (“Do Not Forget Me”), “Barcarolle,” “Intermezzo,” “Etude,” “Scherzino,” “Le ruisseau dans la forêt” (“The Stream in the Forest”), “Elégie,” “Le rêve” (“The Dream”), “Inquiétude” (“Restlessness”), “Rêverie du printemps” (“Spring Reverie”), “Mazurka,” “Marche,” “Tarantella,” “Andante con variazioni,” and “Aux champs” (“In the Fields”).

Influence of Romantic Composers

The set contains a kaleidoscopic variety of character pieces. Many of them reveal a strong influence from the composers of the Romantic era, of which the most recognizable is Chopin. The third piece, “Nocturne” in D-flat major begins with a falling interval, recalling the opening of Chopin’s Nocturne op. 27 no. 2 and Prelude op. 28 no. 15, which are written in the same key. Numbers 4, 7, 20, and 22 are in the character of ballade, waltz, mazurka, and tarantella, respectively; all these are titles of Chopin’s pieces. Numbers 9, 12, 14, 18, and 21 demonstrate Schumann’s influence; for example, no. 9 “Papillons” borrows the light dotted rhythms in 2/4 meter in the second movement of Schumann’s *Papillons* op. 2. Mendelssohn’s *Songs Without Words* also seem to have influenced nos. 2, 16, and 19, especially no. 2; “La toupee” can easily remind us of Mendelssohn’s “Spinning Song” op. 67 no. 4; Liszt’s influence is seen in nos. 13, 15, and 17; and that of Brahms is seen in no. 17. An unusual inclusion within a set of character pieces is no. 23, which is in the form of a theme and 5 variations. Beginning with a peaceful theme in 3/4 meter, this piece must have been modeled after the final movement of Beethoven’s Sonata op. 109. The opening of the last piece, “Aux champs” (“In the Field”), reflects a Russian folk tune and uses a church-bell-like sound (Figure 5), while the middle section includes rhythmical passages in two hands in contrary motion (Figure 6) reminding us of Tchaikovsky’s *Dumka* op. 35 (Figure 7).



Figure 5. Anton Arensky, *Morceaux Caractéristiques* op. 36 no. 24, “Aux champs,” b. 5–6. Source: P. Jurgenson.



Figure 6. Anton Arensky, *Morceaux Caractéristiques* op. 36 no. 24, “Aux champs,” b. 17–18. Source: P. Jurgenson.



Figure 7. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Dumka* op. 59, b. 50–51. Source: Peters.

Arensky's op. 36 no. 8 ("In modo antico") is written in baroque fugal style with the rhythm of a French overture. Numbers 1, 17 (middle section), and 21 are highly orchestral; the first and last are majestic in thick chordal texture, while the latter two include trumpet-like sounds and rhythms. Number 12 ("Intermezzo") is written in the asymmetrical time signature of 5/8. The repeated use of particular intervals is seen in no. 8 (falling fifth), no. 10 (falling second and fourth), and no. 11 (rising sixth). Chromaticism appears in nos. 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 16, and 18. Numbers 4 and 10 begin in an ambiguous tonality while no. 2 in c minor unexpectedly begins in E-flat major.

The Set as a Cycle?

Two consecutive pieces, nos. 6 and 7, are in the style of a waltz, as the former is marked *Tempo di Valse* and the latter is titled "Valse." It is uncertain whether Arensky intentionally placed these two pieces together to be played without pause. Many pieces are written with repeat signs, and the total performance time may be more than 70 minutes, including the lengthy set of variations (no. 23). Moreover, the set begins with a majestic, orchestral "Prélude" in C major but concludes quietly with the sorrowful no. 24 in b minor. With these considerations, it is questionable whether the composer intended the 24 *Morceaux Caractéristiques* op. 36 to be performed as a cycle. The set may have been conceived not as a cyclic composition but as a collection of short character pieces. I believe that playing them individually or playing a selection of pieces would be more effective.

Twenty-Five Préludes op. 64 by César Cui

The Composer

César Cui was born to a French father and Lithuanian mother in Vilnius three decades before Blumenfeld, and Arensky. Brahms, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Balakirev were of the same generation. As a boy, Cui had first piano lessons with his sister and was strongly attracted to the music of Chopin. Although he started composing at the age of 14 and studied figured bass, chorale harmonization, and counterpoint with the Polish composer Stanislav Moniusko,³³ he entered the Engineering School at St. Petersburg in 1851 and later studied at the Academy of Military Engineering (1855–1857); after graduation he began his career as a military teacher, becoming an acknowledged expert on fortifications. In 1856, while he was still a student at the Academy of Military Engineering, Cui met Balakirev and entered into the musical life in St. Petersburg. He was greatly influenced by Balakirev, who may have supervised the orchestration of Cui's piano scherzos (1857).³⁴ The orchestral Scherzo op. 1 was premiered in 1859 as his public debut as composer.³⁵ Although he composed in almost all genres, he is known chiefly as a miniaturist; the major part of his music consists of songs and short chamber and piano pieces.³⁶ Cui was also known as a music critic starting in 1864; he continued writing music criticism regularly for about 40 years, reaching a total of nearly 700 articles.³⁷ In addition to receiving accolades and promotion in his military teaching career, Cui was named a member of the Institut de France in 1894, and during the period 1896–1904 he served as officiating director of the St. Petersburg division of the Russian Music Society.³⁸

Total Scheme

The 25 Préludes op. 64 was first published by P. Jurgenson in 1903. The set consists of 25 preludes instead of 24, beginning and ending in the key of C major. Prior to Cui, the French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan wrote a set of 25 Préludes op. 31 in 1847.³⁹ Cui followed

the order of Chopin's Preludes op. 28 in using the circle of fifths, but the sequence is not exactly the same; after Prélude no. 1 in C major, he skips its relative key of a minor and goes to e minor followed by G major – relative keys of one sharp, but in this case with the expected major–minor ordering reversed. After the relative-key pair of no. 22 in d minor and no. 23 in F major, the piece in a minor comes as no. 24; following the a-minor prelude, Prélude no. 25 in C major concludes the set. This unique order actually follows a scheme of ascent by thirds (major alternating with minor thirds), and with equivalent alternation of major and minor keys: C–em–G–bm–D–f#m–A–c#m–E–g#m–B–ebm–Gb–bbm–Db–f–Ab–cm–Eb–gm–Bb–dm–F–am–C. The result is that two neighboring preludes share two common tones in tonic chords, making a smooth transition from one prelude to the next as a sequence. The repetition of C major to end the set (no. 25) also suggests a sequential compositional intent.

Russian Flavor

Ryder states that Cui himself discussed five traits of Russian characteristics in music: complete freedom of rhythm including odd numbers of measures within phrases, frequent use of church modes other than major or minor, use of plagal cadences, occasional use of static harmony including the use of pedal point, and short melodies using a limited range of intervals.⁴⁰ Two preludes – no. 4 in b minor and no. 11 in B major – display some of those characteristics. The theme of the middle section in the former prelude, which has a stepwise motion in *tarantella* rhythm in 6/8 (Figure 8), recalls the middle-section theme of “Lezginka” in b minor from 12 *Études d'exécution transcendante* op. 11 no. 10 (published ca. 1900) by Sergey Lyapunov⁴¹ (Figure 9).



Figure 8. César Cui, Prélude op. 64 no. 4, b. 42–48. Source: P. Jurgenson.



Figure 9. Sergey Lyapunov, “Lezginka” from 12 *Études d'exécution transcendante* op. 11 no. 10, b. 100–103. Source: J. H. Zimmermann.

The middle-section theme of Cui's Prélude no. 4 in the figure above is in Phrygian mode in a five-bar phrase. Bars 47–48 include sixteenth-note triplets reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's "Song of the Lark" from *Album for the Young* op. 39 no. 22. The middle section maintains a B pedal point throughout, and a plagal cadence (i–IV7–i–IV7–i) emerges in bars 104–108, echoing the harmonic progression in Glinka–Balakirev's *The Lark* (ca. 1864) (I–iv–I–iv–I in bars

65–67). Prélude no. 11 in B major is another example of Russian flavor. The opening theme (Figure 10) starts with a repeated short rhythmic motive, which can remind us of the opening theme of Tchaikovsky’s “Troika (November)” from *The Seasons* op. 37 no. 11.



Figure 10. César Cui, Prélude op. 64 no. 11, b. 1–4. Source: P. Jurgenson.

Prélude no. 11 also uses a pedal point with the tonic B. Cui includes two preludes in asymmetrical meters: no. 14 in b-flat minor in 5/4 and no. 15 in D-flat major in 7/8. Both preludes feature repeated uses of short motives. The stepwise motion of the opening theme in no. 15, marked *pp sempre tranquillo* (Figure 11), recalls Schumann’s “Eusebius” from *Carnaval* op. 9 (1834–1835) in its *sotto voce* opening theme in septuplets.



Figure 11. César Cui, Prélude op. 64 no. 15, b. 1–4. Source: P. Jurgenson.

Schumann’s influence is also seen in Préludes nos. 3, 7, and 21. Chopin’s Nocturne in D-flat major op. 27 no. 2 may be hinted at in the middle section, in D-flat major, of Cui’s Prélude no. 14 in b-flat minor. Although it incorporates traits of Russian music, especially the use of repeated rhythmic motives and frequent pedal points, Cui’s op. 64 seems to reflect late 19th-century Romantic tradition more than Russian nationalistic style. Cui himself said of his own style, in a letter of 1897, “though Russian, my origins are half French, half Lithuanian, and I don’t have the sense of Russian music in my veins.”⁴² The total performance time is around 70 minutes. The sequence of Cui’s Preludes flows smoothly without any surprise because of sharing two common tones from one to the next. The deliberate inclusion of the 25th Prelude in C major suggests that the composer probably envisioned the set to be performed as a cycle.

Twenty-Five Preludes op. 30 by Reinhold Glière

The Composer

Reinhold Glière was born to a German father and Polish mother in Kiev. Being two years younger than Rachmaninoff, he entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1894, where he studied the violin with Vasily Sokolovsky and Jan Hrímalý, harmony with Arensky and Georgii Konius, counterpoint with Sergei Taneyev, and composition with Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov.

He graduated from the Conservatory in 1900 with the gold medal in composition.⁴³ Immediately after graduation, he started teaching harmony and music analysis at Gnessin School of Music in Moscow. Sergei Prokofiev was a private student of Glière in the summers of 1902 and 1903. From 1905 to 1908 Glière went to Berlin to continue further study in conducting and composition. Upon returning to Moscow, he began his conducting career, becoming popular as a conductor of orchestral works.⁴⁴ Glière wrote more than 500 works,⁴⁵ predominantly on a grand scale in the large forms (opera, ballet, symphony, symphonic poem, etc.). The most important element in his style is expressive melody.⁴⁶ During the first decade of the 20th century, he wrote within various genres, such as chamber, orchestral, vocal, and piano music. These works include String Sextet no. 1 op. 1, for which Glière received a Glinka Award in 1905, as well as 25 Preludes op. 30.⁴⁷

Glière's 25 Preludes op. 30 was published by P. Jurgenson⁴⁸ in five volumes over a period of three years, with each volume containing five preludes: volumes 1–2 in 1906, volumes 3–4 in 1907, and volume 5 in 1908.⁴⁹ These may have been written in Germany as the composer studied conducting with Oskar Fried in Berlin.⁵⁰

Tonal Scheme and Influence of Other Composers

Glière's preludes start and end in C major. As discussed above, Alkan and Cui had previously composed sets of 25 preludes, which may have influenced Glière's work. His op. 30 follows the same key scheme as J. S. Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, with pairs of parallel major and minor keys in ascending order of the chromatic scale. Glière's prelude style is highly chromatic with colorful harmonies and modulations, requiring virtuosic technical skills. The use of chordal texture in Prelude no. 1 in C major matches the opening numbers of the previous sets by Blumenfeld, Arensky, and Cui (Rachmaninoff's op. 3 no. 2 is also chordal). Prelude no. 2 in c minor (Figure 12) displays a significant similarity to Chopin's Prelude no. 28 no. 20 in the same key in the harmonic progression.



Figure 12. Reinhold Glière, Prelude op. 30 no. 2, b. 1–7. Source: P. Jurgenson.

Another Chopinesque influence can be seen in the last two pieces, Preludes 24 and 25; no. 24 in b minor includes double octave lines in unison, which is similar to Chopin Etude op. 25 no. 10 in the same key, while no. 25 begins with a unison melody in *ppp*, which recalls the finale movement of Chopin Sonata no. 2 as well as the Prelude in e-flat minor op. 28 no. 14. Two consecutive pieces, Preludes 10 and 11, may have been inspired by Rachmaninoff's compositions; no. 10 in e minor (Figure 13) may have been modeled on Rachmaninoff's *Moment musicaux* op. 16 no. 4 in the same key (1896), and the rising lyrical melodic line of no. 11 in F major can recall Rachmaninoff's Prelude op. 23 no. 8 in A-flat major (1903).



Figure 13. Reinhold Glière, Prelude op. 30 no. 10, b. 1–7. Source: P. Jurgenson.

Prelude no. 11 is written in an asymmetrical meter of 5/4. Scriabin's influence can be recognized in Preludes 13, 19, 20, and 24. A few successive preludes share some related traits; for example, each of nos. 5, 6, and 7 features a specific interval and rhythm: no. 5 in D major uses recurring rising intervals in trochaic dotted rhythm, no. 6 in d minor has thirds in perpetual motion, and no. 7 in E-flat major uses recurring falling fourths in iambic dotted rhythm. The dotted rhythms of no. 7 noticeably continue in no. 8 in e-flat minor. Three pieces, nos. 16, 17, and 18, are all written in thick chordal texture, reaching a sustained intensity as one of the climactic moments in the entire set. Prelude no. 23 in B major is chorale-like in the style of liturgical music, serving as a short interlude before the last two passionate preludes. None of the 25 Preludes op. 30 seem to reveal a distinctive Russian nationalistic style. Although the total performance duration of the set is more than 50 minutes, the cyclic structure of beginning and ending in C major, along with a brilliant conclusion and the inclusion of relationships among some successive preludes, may support the idea of performing the set as a cycle as the composer's intention.

Conclusion

The piano character pieces composed by Blumenfeld, Arensky, Cui, and Glière, each exploring all 24 major and minor keys, stand as captivating and aesthetically rich creations. The table below illustrates a comparison of the total scheme in the four works (Figure 14).

Despite employing varied tonal schemes, an intriguing commonality emerges – each set commences with a piece in C major, notably featuring chordal texture in their opening preludes. Nos. 5, 9, 13, 17, and 21 in all four works are in D major, E major, F-sharp major, A-flat major, and B-flat major, respectively. All composers except Cui were pianists and conductors, so that these composers infuse their works with a highly pianistic and virtuosic quality, often enriched by orchestral sonorities in lush textures.

Evident throughout is the borrowing of characteristics from other composers, most notably by Arensky, while Glière exhibits a more subtle influence. The pervasive impact of Chopin is discernible across all four compositions, with Blumenfeld's set closely mirroring the tonal organization of Chopin's Preludes op. 28. Chromaticism finds a prominent place in Glière's set, where nearly every prelude incorporates chromatic elements, in contrast to Cui, whose pieces exhibit chromaticism in fewer than half.

No.	Blumenfeld 24 Preludes, op. 17	Arensky 24 Morceaux caractéristiques, op. 36	Cui 25 Préludes, op. 64	Glière 25 Preludes, op. 30
1	C major	C major	C major	C major
2	a minor	Eb major → c minor	e minor	c minor
3	G major	Db major	G major	Db major
4	e minor	C# minor → Db major	b minor	c# minor
5	D major	D major	D major	D major
6	b minor	d minor	f# minor	d minor
7	A major	Eb major	A major	Eb major
8	a minor	eb minor	c# minor	eb minor
9	E major	E major	E major	E major
10	c# minor	e minor	g# minor	e minor
11	B major	F major	B major	F major
12	g# minor	f minor	eb minor	f minor
13	F# major	F# major	F# major	F# major
14	eb minor	f# minor	bb minor	f# minor
15	Db major	G major	Db major	G major
16	bb minor	g minor	f minor	g minor
17	Ab major	Ab major	Ab major	Ab major
18	f minor	g# minor	c minor	g# minor
19	Eb major	A major	Eb major	A major
20	c minor	a minor	g minor	a minor
21	Bb major	Bb major	Bb major	Bb major
22	g minor	bb minor	d minor	bb minor
23	F major	B major	F major	B major
24	d minor	b minor	a minor	b minor
25			C major	C major

Figure 14. Table of the tonal schemes in the four works.

Russian nationalistic sentiments permeate the works of Blumenfeld, Arensky, and Cui, contributing to their distinctive musical voices. Noteworthy stylistic choices include the frequent use of short motives by Blumenfeld and Cui, along with the incorporation of asymmetrical meters in all sets except Blumenfeld’s. It becomes apparent that the sets by Blumenfeld, Cui, and Glière are intended for performance as cycles, underscoring their interconnectedness.

While scholars have raised concerns about the originality of these compositions, the relative obscurity of these composers and their piano works invites a fresh evaluation. The scarcity of performances, particularly as cycles, suggests that their merit deserves reexamination by performers and listeners alike. Without a preconceived notion of their originalities, a closer study may reveal the unique beauty, intricate melodies, harmonies, and

profound emotions that define each of these sets. Their true originality unfolds through an unbiased exploration, encouraging a deeper appreciation of these lesser-known yet remarkable piano pieces.

Endnotes

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25 Bols, 4.

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