# THE SHORT POLYPHONIC CYCLE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE INTERPRETATION

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***https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18447624***

***Abstract.*** *This article is devoted to one of the most complex problems in performance pedagogy—the formation of a pianist's polyphonic thinking in the process of studying small polyphonic cycles and their performance interpretation within the educational and training framework of higher education. It also examines the development of the small polyphonic cycle using examples from music of the 17th–18th centuries. The study analyzes the specific features of polyphonic texture and thematic development in composers' fugues, as well as the dependence of performance interpretation on the characteristics of voice leading and formal organization. The formation of performers' polyphonic thinking in the piano class through small polyphonic cycles represents one of the key directions in the academic training of musicians. A thoughtful understanding of the conceptual content of polyphonic cycles in stylistic retrospect naturally finds reflection in performance practice, ensuring a holistic and stylistically accurate realization of fugues in both concert and educational settings.*

***Keywords:*** *polyphonic cycle, prelude, fugue, form, genre, composer, music, performer.*

## Introduction

The qualitative dimension of any educational process is determined by one of its key components – the content of education, whose conceptual coherence, supported by appropriate methodological frameworks, determines the effectiveness of a pedagogical system aimed at the formation of the individual. Musical knowledge, encompassing the theoretical foundations of music and the historical dimension of musical art, constitutes the core of professional musical training [1, 57]. Within systematically organized educational processes that project cultural contexts, musical-theoretical knowledge plays a decisive role in the development of polyphonic awareness and thinking in performing musicians. A solid theoretical foundation concerning polyphonic music, its genres, and compositional techniques significantly supports expressive performance, the comprehension of dramaturgical tensions, and an understanding of polyphonic musical discourse.

Musical performance practice reveals two interrelated and mutually dependent components: artistic perception, grounded in an understanding of a work's conceptual and semantic content, and its interpretative realization in instrumental performance. As V. L. Zhivov observes, "comprehension implies a detailed study of a musical work in all its aspects and the formation on this basis of a performance concept; transmission refers to the realization of this concept in the course of rehearsal and public concert performance" [28, 18–19]. The development of polyphonic thinking in piano students through short polyphonic cycles represents one of the central objectives of academic musical training. Conceptual awareness of the semantic content of these cycles, viewed through stylistic retrospection, finds natural embodiment in performance practice.

Short “prelude and fugue” cycles have become an integral component of contemporary pianists’ educational curricula and performance repertoire. This exceptionally rich artistic heritage presents considerable challenges in terms of understanding the achievements of polyphonic musical style, mastering interpretative skills, and grasping the dialectical processes of world cognition as mediated by the principle of polyphonic thinking in pianistic perception. Although the “prelude and fugue” cycle has been examined to varying degrees in musicological literature, it has rarely been approached as an object of performance-oriented study. Scholarly analysis has focused primarily on the thematic material and formal principles of preludes or on the polyphonic techniques of fugues considered separately. By contrast, the formation of polyphonic thinking through concise polyphonic cycles emerges today as a pressing interpretative task within the educational process of musicians.

The conceptual premises of cyclic organization are concentrated in the figurative dynamism of preludes and fugues within stylistic practice. The artistic conception of this binary form is rooted in the dual nature of human perception and in the philosophical understanding of the unity of opposites. The concise polyphonic cycle unfolds through a system of contrasting images and functional interdependence between its two parts, allowing both the prelude and the fugue to correspond to a unified musical and stylistic conception. The dialectical development of musical art has been accompanied by the transformation of established genres and the emergence of new ones. An examination of the genesis of the binary polyphonic cycle suggests that its formation is inseparable from the broader evolution of cyclic forms. The early transformation of the French canzona into a cyclic structure – independent of the multi-movement sonata – gave rise to a closed two-part composition. Originating as an introductory musical gesture, this element gradually separated from its polyphonic core. The contrast inherent in two-part cyclic organization became widespread in musical practice, while ensemble performance expanded the canzona’s scale through alternation of polyphonic and homophonic sections, thereby contributing to the emergence of cyclic genres.

The polyphonic miniature cycle combining a prelude (toccata or fantasia) and a fugue represents a distinctive phenomenon of Baroque instrumental music, reaching its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries. The juxtaposition of the improvisatory autonomy of one movement with the intellectual abstraction of the other reflects the complexity of historical worldviews. The cycle’s singular originality lies in its contrasting musical imagery, articulated through tempo differentiation, genre-specific traits, textural organization, and modal-harmonic processes. The notion of the “cycle” presupposes semantic unity and formal completeness within defined temporal boundaries; consequently, artistic reinterpretation in music contributes to the formation of cognitive structures of musical thinking. Artistic concreteness is thus transformed into a vivid system of symbolic values. Particularly significant are interpretations of concise polyphonic cycles through the principle of multa paucis (“much in little”), whereby the spiritual aspirations of an era are condensed into the binary cycle form.

One of the principal forms of imitative polyphony is the fugue, which crystallized in the works of 17th century composers such as D. Buxtehude, J. Pachelbel, and G. Böhm. Girolamo Frescobaldi’s organ collection “Fiori musicali” laid the foundations for a new polyphonic compositional approach and is closely associated with the emergence of the fugue as a genre. Within Baroque practice, the fugue functioned as a form of imitative or contrapuntal thematic exposition, governed by tonal-harmonic organization. Although no strict rules existed regarding the number of subjects or compositional symmetry, the presence of a clearly articulated subject,

answer, countersubject, episodes, and stretto remained essential. In the history of polyphonic music, Johann Pachelbel is recognized not only as a master of fugue writing but also as one of the first composers to establish polyphonic cycles by preceding the fugue with a short introductory piece—typically a prelude or toccata. His oeuvre includes large-scale polyphonic cycles incorporating smaller prelude-and-fugue units. Nevertheless, the complete formation and culmination of both the fugue and the concise polyphonic cycle were achieved in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach's fugues evolve into autonomous instrumental compositions, sometimes assuming the scope of concert works or functioning as the central narrative axis of a prelude-and-fugue cycle, while consistently offering exceptional interpretative depth.

Within cyclic interpretation, the prelude—occasionally replaced by a fantasia or toccata—serves as an introductory movement characterized by improvisational freedom and flexibility in expressive means, formal design, and thematic development. While fantasias and toccatas emphasize virtuosity and liberated tonal-modal relations, the prelude remains historically central to the formation of the concise polyphonic cycle. Early antecedents of the prelude can be traced to the introductory sections of the French canzona. Ensemble performance practice later encouraged the separation of this introductory material from the main body, leading to its recognition as an autonomous musical form. Additional sources in the development of the prelude genre include organ preludes associated with congregational Protestant chorales, which fulfilled both an anticipatory emotional function and a programmatic illustrative role. The genre characteristics of the chorale prelude were crystallized in the works of the Dutch composer Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck and further developed in the performance practice of Samuel Scheidt, a key figure in the German organ tradition.

Most preludes were composed as single-movement forms with continuous development, characterized by the ongoing unfolding of thematic material through harmonic or polyphonic processes. The maintenance of a unified emotional state functions as a structural principle of such works, resulting in thematic coherence and a stable expressive atmosphere sustained by harmonic tension and resolution within the principal key. From its inception, the Prelude and Fugue cycle achieved formal unity through shared tonality, adapting the principle of modal coherence found in the dance suite. The Romantic inclination toward introspection and intellectual reflection led to an increased conceptualization of musical imagery. Composers such as Franz Liszt, César Franck, and Johannes Brahms contributed to the development of concise polyphonic cycles. At the turn of the twentieth century, interest in polyphonic technique became more ambivalent; nevertheless, Max Reger was among the first to revive early polyphonic genres by composing cycles of preludes and fugues. This tradition was continued by Sergei Taneyev, Vsevolod Zaderatsky, Paul Hindemith, Dmitri Shostakovich, Rodion Shchedrin, and Georgy Mushel, each pursuing distinct compositional aims—from exploring new modal systems to integrating contemporary musical language into historical polyphonic forms.

Music theory offers multiple interpretations of the concept of the polyphonic cycle. V. P. Frayonov emphasizes its structural integrity governed by artistic intent, defining it as a form comprising autonomous movements unified by a shared conceptual framework [82, p. 532]. The polyphonic cycle thus embodies general principles of cyclic form, united by dramaturgical design and articulated through polyphonic texture. Performance theory further clarifies the evolutionary logic of polyphony and its manifestation in concise polyphonic cycles through the musician's conceptual apparatus. Concepts such as polyphonic compositional technique, polyphonic form, and polyphonic genre play a crucial role in pianistic interpretation. While polyphonic

compositional technique refers to the independence of melodic lines and multi-voiced thematic development, polyphonic form addresses structural organization and types of polyphonic exposition (canon, invention, fugue). Contemporary pedagogical practice, however, often reveals a convergence of form and genre concepts in the interpretation of polyphonic works. As E. V. Nazaikinsky notes, genre constitutes a historically established and relatively stable category defined by social function, performance conditions, and the nature of musical content and form [58, p. 94]. Within a historical perspective, genre thus reflects the artistic character of an epoch, while form represents the textural realization of musical thought.

An examination of concise polyphonic cycles across different stylistic periods reveals a multiplicity of evolutionary transitions in both genre and technique, reflecting the conceptual complexity of the polyphonic cycle. The renewal of artistic stylistics often assumes a transformative or even revolutionary character within composers' creative output.

**Conclusions**

– musical knowledge constitutes the foundational basis of performers' educational development and the formation of polyphonic thinking, underpinning effective interpretative performance;

– the cultivation of polyphonic thinking through concise polyphonic cycles represents a crucial objective in contemporary musical education;

– the figurative dynamism of preludes and fugues establishes meaningful continuity within historical musical-stylistic practice and defines the microcycle as a vehicle of historical succession;

– the concept of the polyphonic cycle is clarified through differentiation among polyphonic compositional technique, polyphonic form, and polyphonic genre, all of which contribute to the deepening of pianists' interpretative competence.

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