



# JS BACH

## Prelude in C BWV 846

The opening of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* may demand a steady pulse, says **Melanie Spanswick**, but there's no need to be solemn

**Ability rating** Early Intermediate

**Info**

**Key:** C major  
**Tempo:** Moderato  
**Style:** Baroque

**Will improve your**

✓ Legato  
✓ Articulation  
✓ Dynamic gradation

**A prelude is a 'warm-up' or preface to the main event.** In this case it's a fugue – or rather a sequence of 24 such pairings, which work their way systematically through all the major and minor keys. Bach was a master of counterpoint: the relationship between musical lines (also known as voices, even if we're playing rather than singing them) that are interdependent yet autonomous.

**Is the C major Prelude contrapuntal or homophonic?** The answer is both: the four-bar phrases are comprised of one chord per half bar, but look a little closer and you'll see that each note (particularly in the LH) contributes to the musical line, providing important shape and contour within each phrase. There is a texture of three voices: two in the LH and one in the RH.

**You may be tempted to take the Prelude slowly and with reverence.** Bach gave no tempo indication, and as with most works from the Baroque period, much is left to the performer's discretion. A moderate pulse of crotchet equals 72 leaves room for an expressive account, yet keeps the line flowing naturally. This is vital; the pulse must be maintained throughout, with little rubato. On the *Pianist* CD, Chenyin Li is swifter, at around 84 beats per minute: this more fluid tempo also works well. Either way, a sense of line is paramount.

**Here's a tip for painless learning of the note intervals and patterns.** Play the two LH notes of each half bar at the same time. Pay close attention to the two musical voices: both must be held to the end of the intended beat.

**Let's take the LH of bar 1 as an example.** Hold middle C with the 3rd finger until the next middle C is sounded (on beat 3), above which the E (second quaver beat; beat 1 of the first minim) should be held until beat 3, when it can be released quickly before being sounded again on the second quaver of the third beat. Keep arm and body movement to a minimum,



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avoiding gaps in the sound and any jolting at the beginnings and ends of notes. This practice method will bring stable, secure figuration.

**The RH note patterns can also be 'blocked out' too.** Play all the notes in a half-bar at once: this will be essential in the top line, because the patterns tend to change frequently, requiring prompt hand-position movement (bars 15-16 and bars 33-34, for example).

**When it comes to practising with hands together, continue to block out each half bar.** This practice should consolidate your muscle memory for each sequence, ensuring each chord change is located on time. This is also the point at which you can begin to relish Bach's satisfying harmonic language.

**These methods should get the notes under your fingers.** Once you feel confident about the melodic development of the Prelude, your attention can turn to tonal and rhythmic precision. Each note organically gives rise to the next, as though there is only one voice being heard and not three.

**Practise playing right into the key bed.** Using a solid finger touch (with the finger-tips) make sure that every finger descends to the bottom of the key so that every single note is articulated with definition. Steady practice like this should strengthen your fingers and increase your tonal control of the piano. Be aware of keeping your arms and wrists flexible and loose; only the fingers and knuckles should remain firm.

**Let's turn to controlling the pulse of the Prelude.** Try counting out every semiquaver, aloud or with a metronome; combined with a deep finger touch, this

will curb any instinct to fiddle with the pulse and speed up or slow down. Shaping the expression of the Prelude should be done through the sound, not the pulse. As the notes, rhythm and touch become increasingly fluent and accurate, you can lighten the heavy touch that you've used for practising.

**A fluid legato is essential for an expressive, sensitive account.** To move smoothly from one note to the next, transfer the weight of your fingers evenly

### Learning Tip

With good finger legato, there is little need for the sustaining pedal, but it will give rich resonance to the final chord.

from key to key, as though you were taking them for a walk across the keys. Especially in the RH, lift the fingers cleanly after each semiquaver, and make a lateral wrist motion when moving from the bottom to top notes in each triad.

**I have made a few editorial suggestions about dynamics.** There are many plausible interpretations, but you may like to start *mezzo-piano* and gradually increase the sound until bar 7. There will be many dynamic nuances throughout, and then at bar 24, after a decrescendo to *pianissimo*, begin a long crescendo to bar 30 before dying away at the end.

**Enjoy the harmonic ripples when Bach disturbs the smooth C major surface with accidentals.** The LH A $\flat$  in bar 14 and RH B $\flat$  in bar 20 require a different timbre, perhaps a deeper touch and a slight tenuto. Try leaning expressively into the second LH quaver of bars 33 and 34, before bringing the piece to rest with a tranquil final chord. ■