

# Learning Bach's short preludes: A sequential approach

by Donald Alfano

**J**ohann Sebastian Bach's **Eighteen Short Preludes** are exquisite miniatures and exceptional teaching pieces that provide a necessary stage of development from the shorter works in the *Anna Magdalena Notebook* to the Two- and Three-Part Inventions and other larger works of Bach. Far from easy, they are often glossed over in favor of studying the Inventions, or simply studied in small number not allowing adequate preparation for learning more difficult contrapuntal compositions. Bach sketched some of these during lessons to meet the needs of students including his most celebrated pupil and son, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. The first six (BWV 924-928 & 930) originally appeared in the *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann*, begun in 1720. Others (BWV 939-942 & 999) have come down to us from Johann Kellner (1705-1772), another pupil of the composer, and still others, *Sechs Kleine Präludien für Anfänger auf dem Klavier (Six Short Preludes for Beginners)* consist of preludes in the key scheme C-c-d-D-E-e assigned by J.S. Bach.

Although he placed the latter group in this key scheme, Bach did not arrange any of the preludes in order of difficulty. This article will suggest an order of studying the preludes, and offer some strategies for learning them. For study purposes, the Alfred edition (ed. Willard Palmer) is also highly recommended. Aside from the invaluable preface, the ed-

itor realizes the ornaments, suggests tempo indications, metronome markings, phrasings, dynamics, fingerings, and other expressive indications that were not specified by the composer. Although these are clearly delineated in gray, students and/or teachers should also have access to an urtext edition, in order to view a completely unedited score.

### Twelve Short Preludes

**Prelude in C Major (BWV 939)** is one of the more concise preludes and contains features found in the more difficult preludes such as ornamentation, pedal points, broken chord figurations, and a brief cadenza. It begins with an organ-like pedal point and contains broken ascending chords in the right hand. The student should be able to block these chords and identify the harmonies. In order to negotiate the pattern smoothly and with ease, the arm and hand should move as a unit and one should get the "arm behind the hand." This Prelude is sparsely ornamented and there is a descending sixteenth-note pattern which acts as a short cadenza.

**Prelude in C Major (BWV 924)** begins with a broken-chord figuration in the right hand, and with a more melodic pattern and ornamentation in the left hand.

Excerpt 1: Prelude in C Major, BWV 924, mm. 1-2.



In addition to practicing the hands alone, it would be useful to learn the left hand without the ornamentation and double its part with the right hand (playing the left-hand part with the right hand), since this is the part that has more melodic profile. The right-hand sixteenth-note figures can be practiced very softly as a block, both independently and with the left hand playing what is written. A cadenza in sixteenth notes under a dominant pedal point follows, which can be played with a subtle flexibility of tempo. After studying this piece, the student should be able to identify the pedal point, cadenza, and the harmonies.

Excerpt 2: Prelude in C Major, BWV 924, mm. 9-12:



**Prelude in C Minor (BWV 999)** is known as the “Lute Prelude,” since it was originally composed for that instrument. It does not appear in the urtext edition, but does appear in the *Bach Gesellschaft*, Peters, and Alfred editions. It would be helpful to listen to a performance of this on the lute and also on harpsichord with a lute stop (I suggest Wanda Landowska’s recording on Pearl Recordings).

Although this prelude is void of ornamentation, the balance and articulation between the hands is challenging. The right-hand broken chords should be played lightly with a natural rotation toward the thumb to ensure ease, while the left-hand eighth-notes would sound effective played *portamento*. Again, the student should be able to block the chords, identify the harmonies, and make choices regarding dynamics and tempo. For this reason, the instructor should have an urtext edition handy and the student, with the aid of the teacher, should be able to make these decisions prior to consulting an edited version.

**Prelude in D Minor (BWV 940)** contains dotted rhythms, ornaments, and tied notes; it also necessitates

finger substitutions, an important skill to develop in order to clearly express contrapuntal texture. As Rosalyn Tureck states in *An Introduction to the Performance of Bach*, “frequent changes of fingering fit the style of this music because they are often indispensable in realizing purely musical demands, and overlapping, underlapping fingering, which is also implied in changes of fingers on one note, introduces a smoothness of connection beyond any other means.”<sup>1</sup> If the student cannot negotiate the tied notes and substitutions, then eliminate one or both and incorporate them later. While substituting, one should not squeeze or hold the tied notes with too much force which would inhibit freer motion and tighten the hand.

**Prelude in D Minor (BWV 926)** consists of broken chords in the right hand with sparse ornamentation throughout. The eighth-note motion is offset at the end by a brief cadenza-like flourish in sixteenths that has been encountered in previous preludes. The *non-legato* touch would seem appropriate for the right-hand eighth-notes, and incorporating a natural rotation will help ensure fluidity of sound and freedom of movement.

**Prelude in D Minor, BWV 926** from the *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*. Image courtesy of the Irving S. Gilmore Library, Yale University.



**Prelude in G Minor (BWV 929)** is not included in the urtext edition but does appear in the Peters and Alfred Editions. Often referred to as *Minuet and Trio*, Bach composed this movement to be included

in *Partia di Signore Steltzeln*, a suite by Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel (1690-1749) that appears in the *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann*. Stölzel also composed works that are included in the *Anna Magdalena Notebook* of 1725. This prelude, more plaintive in character, introduces tied-notes and requires finger substitutions in order to obtain a more *legato* effect. The Peters edition includes inner phrasings which affords the opportunity to develop more finger independence. Whichever edition is used, playing the three parts individually and in various combinations—soprano and bass, alto and bass, and soprano and alto (which appears in the right hand alone)—with both hands, then recreating the same effect with one hand (as written) will benefit the student's technique and hearing.

**Prelude in E Minor (BWV 941)** is a lyrical character piece that evokes a melancholy mood. Students should be encouraged to create a title or conjure up a scene, which might very well help convey the spirit of this short prelude—or any of the other preludes for that matter. This sparsely ornamented prelude will allow the student to focus on the tied-notes and to make sure that the extensions are approached with caution so as not to unduly stretch the hand. For practice, it would be advantageous to break the chord and release one voice while connecting the other part, and then reverse the procedure, allowing the inner part to be played *legato*. Practicing this prelude with the hands two octaves apart—right hand one octave higher, left hand as written; and left hand one octave lower, right hand as written—will help the student hear the counterpoint more clearly.

**Prelude in A Minor (BWV 942)** which is dance like, is effective when played *capriccioso* as the Peters edition suggests. Since some of the preludes express a dance quality, as do many of Bach's keyboard works, students should become familiar with the various dance movements of the composer's English Suites, French Suites, and Partitas even though they may not have played them. They should be heard on recordings on both the harpsichord and piano. In addition, the Orchestral Suites offer another glimpse into the composer's treatment of dance movements. By being acquainted with the various dance movements of the Baroque era, students can arrive

**Excerpt 3: Prelude in A Minor, BWV 942, mm. 1-3.**



**Excerpt 4: Prelude in A minor, BWV 942, mm. 1-2, with an alternate articulation.**



at their own conclusions regarding tempo, since Bach did not supply tempo or character indications for his keyboard works, with few exceptions. The A minor prelude also offers a great opportunity for experiments in phrasing. The triplets could be played staccato or phrased in a few different ways, such as slurring the second and third note, which can be seen in the Peters Edition, or, more effectively slurring the first two notes, which would enhance the dance-like quality and meter.

**Prelude in D Major (BWV 925)** is more majestic and contains few indications for ornamentation (m. 14), yet the prelude requires carefully worked out fingerings, finger substitutions, and has many tied notes. This is a three- and four-part prelude in contrast to many of the others that contain only two parts. Separate voice practice would be beneficial in addition to play-



ing some of right- and left- hand parts with two hands (mm. 2, 4, 10, and 14-17 of the right hand, and mm. 6, 15, 17, and 18 of the left hand) as was recommended for Prelude in G Minor (BWV 929).

**Prelude in G Minor (BWV 930)** contains broken chords similar to the Prelude in D Minor (BWV 926), but with more ornamentation and counterpoint. Many of the short preludes are eloquent lessons in themselves on Bach's approach to ornamentation. This prelude should be studied after several others containing fewer and less varied embellishments are mastered. Bach was quite specific in the preludes as to the type of ornamentation to be incorporated. According to C.P.E. Bach in his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, "it is unfortunate that there are also poor embellishments and that good ones are sometimes used too frequently and ineptly. Because of this, it has always been better for composers to specify the proper embellishments unmistakably, instead of leaving their selection to the whims of tasteless performers."<sup>2</sup>

However, it became a common practice for the performers to supply some of their own embellishments, especially upon repetition of parts such as in movements of suites and perhaps in the Inventions and Sinfonias. Some of the preludes can,

Excerpt 5: Prelude in G Minor, BWV 930, mm. 1-6.

in fact, benefit from additional ornamentation. Noteworthy is that this prelude contains the only example of Bach's fingering. Students should certainly attempt Bach's fingering, but, with the help of a teacher, they should also be able to formulate their own fingerings to meet their specific needs.

**Prelude in F Major (BWV 928)**, a *perpetuum mobile*, is similar in character to the F major Two-Part Invention. It would be wise to practice this prelude at different tempi, both with and without a metronome. Again, at this juncture, the student should be able to block and identify chords, and identify the harmonic motion of the left-hand eighth-note

passage (mm. 5-8). There are a few different phrasings possible for this passage with which students should experiment. Any additional ornamentation in this prelude would be superfluous.

Excerpt 6: Prelude in F Major, BWV 928, mm. 5-7 (articulation added).

## Six Short Preludes

**Prelude in C Major (BWV 933)** opens the group of *Sechs Kleine Präludien für Anfänger (Six Short Preludes for Beginners)*, arranged by Bach in order of key scheme. This prelude, in binary form, is more orchestral and majestic, consisting of four measures of a three- and four-part texture followed by four measures of two-part writing. In measures 5-8 a

Excerpt 7: Prelude in C Major, BWV 933, mm. 1-2.

variety of articulations can be employed: the right hand could be assigned all staccato notes or a two-note phrased pattern followed by staccatos, whereas the left hand would sound effective with a two-note phrased pattern followed by *portamento*. Upon repetition, students should be encouraged to supply additional ornamentation.

Excerpt 8: Prelude in C Major, BWV 933, mm. 5-6 (articulation added).

**Prelude in C Minor (BWV 934)** evokes a *minuet*, and is more contemplative and similar in character to other movements of Bach in the same key, namely the *Sarabande* of the second Partita (BWV 826), and the *Allemande* of the second French Suite (BWV 813), both of which should be

heard by the student for comparison. The student should experiment with a variety of phrasing and articulation, especially the right hand playing *legato*, then *non-legato*, then a two-note slur pattern. Again, one can easily incorporate judicious ornamentation upon repetition.

**Prelude in D Major (BWV 936)** can easily be imagined as a conversation where a dialogue is ensuing between mm. 1-7, which move primarily in eighth notes, and mm. 8-16, which move in sixteenth notes. Experiment with the articulation and phrasing of the left-hand moving bass line, as was the case with the left hand motion of the Preludes in F Major (BWV 927) and C Major (BWV 933).

### Editions consulted:

Bach, J. S. (1992). *18 Short Preludes*. Willard A. Palmer (Ed.). Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.

Bach, J. S. (1958). *Kleine Präludien und Fughetten*. Herman Keller (Ed.). New York: C.F. Peters.

Bach, J.S. (1975). *Kleine Präludien Fughetten, Urtext*. Munich: G. Henle Verlag.

Bach, J. S. (1962). *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*. Wolfgang Plath (Ed.). Basel: Barenreiter.

Bach, J. S. (1853, 1890, 1894, and 1874, reprinted in the Dover Edition, 1991). *Miscellaneous Keyboard works from the Bach-Gesellschaft Edition*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

### Other sources:

Schweitzer, Albert. (1923). *J.S. Bach* (Ernest Newman, Trans.). New York: MacMillian Co.

Wolf, Christoph. (2000). *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

## Suggested order of study

From <i>Twelve Short Preludes for Beginners</i>	Reference number in Peters thematic index
1. Prelude in C Major, BWV 939	2
2. Prelude in C Major, BWV 924	1
3. Prelude in C Minor, BWV 999	3
4. Prelude in D Minor, BWV 940	6
5. Prelude in D Minor, BWV 926	5
6. Prelude in G Minor, BWV 929	10
7. Prelude in E Minor, BWV 941	7
8. Prelude in A Minor, BWV 942	12
9. Prelude in D Major, BWV 925	4
10. Prelude in G Minor, BWV 930	11
11. Prelude in F Major, BWV 927	8
From <i>Six Short Preludes for Beginners</i>	
12. Prelude in C Major, BWV 933	13
13. Prelude in C Minor, BWV 934	14
14. Prelude in D Major, BWV 936	16
15. Prelude in D Minor, BWV 935	15
16. Prelude in E Minor, BWV 939	18
17. Prelude in E Major, BWV 937	17
18. Prelude in F Major, BWV 928	9
(From <i>Twelve Short Preludes</i> )	

Numbers from *J.S. Bach Little Preludes and Fugues* ed. by Hermann Keller, Edition Peters EP200A. Used by permission.

**Preludes in D Minor (BWV 935), in E Minor (BWV 939), and in E Major (BWV 937),** are, in essence, two-part inventions, are some of the most challenging preludes of the set, and make an excellent transition to Bach's more difficult works. Students should experiment with phrasing and articulation, yet the subject should be phrased consistently upon its repetition; a standard practice in the treatment of Bach's contrapuntal works. Other keyboard works of the same key such as the Invention in D Minor, and Preludes and Fugues in E Minor (BWV 855) and E Major (BWV 854) should be heard by the student for comparison. The usual practice of playing at various speeds, two octaves apart, in addition to perhaps transposing the parts is highly recommended. Although the latter approach may seem daunting for the student, the rewards are worth the effort. These preludes, composed in binary form, could easily be ornamented upon repetition. At this juncture, and after studying several preludes, students should be able to make their own decisions regarding tempo, dynamics, articulation, phrasing, fingering, and ornamentation before consulting an edited version.

**Prelude in F major (BWV 928)**, from the first group of Twelve Short Preludes, is one of the most difficult of all of these miniatures, and it requires meticulous practice in order

Excerpt 9: Prelude in F Major, BWV 928, mm. 15-17.



to express the effervescent character at an appropriate tempo. Tied notes, suspensions, and chromatic alterations occur in this short gem, and it poses many challenges in terms of fingering, finger substitutions, and manual dexterity. A comparison to the Prelude from the F major English Suite (BWV 809) would be most instructive.

Aside from being exceptional teaching pieces, these preludes are effective performing material, and, with their contrasting moods, they provide great recital openers or encores. Although standard repertoire for harpsichordists, they have disappeared from piano recitals in recent years in favor of the larger works of Bach. After studying several preludes, students will be more knowledgeable regarding Bach's style, and be able to make a healthy transition to the larger works of Bach and many other styles of keyboard literature. ▲

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**Selected Discography:**

Gilbert, Kenneth. *Bach's Short Preludes*. Archiv Produktion (DG) 419426.

Hewitt, Angela. *The Complete Keyboard Works of J.S. Bach*. Hyperion CDS44421/35, (CDs 4 & 5).

Landowska, Wanda. *Landowska plays Bach*. Pearl Gemm CD-9489.

Tureck, Rosalyn. *The Rosalyn Tureck Collection: The Young Visionary*. Vai audio 1085.

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Tureck, Rosalyn. (1960). *An Introduction to the Performance of Bach, Vol. 2*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Bach, C.P.E. (1949). *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (William J. Mitchell, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton Co., p. 79.



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