

WTC II/12 in F minor – Prelude

Several features make access to this prelude easy for listeners. Its phrases are regular and neatly contrasted with regard to texture, melodic figures, rhythmic features, and intensity. Moreover, almost all of these phrases recur several times in the course of the composition, so that a high degree of familiarization is possible, particularly since both halves are repeated. It is thus safe to state that the F-minor prelude is determined by its material. The reluctance to say “by motifs” is owed to the fact that one expects motifs in Bach’s compositions to be single-voiced units used within a polyphonic texture, with imitations, sequences, and partial developments. While the phrases here represent a variety of textures, imitative play is not among them.

The harmonic progression in this prelude is much more largely scaled than the design in four-measure phrases might suggest. In fact, many of the phrases do not establish independent harmonic clauses. The overall design encompasses mainly the familiar functions: a progressive step away from the tonic in the first half of the prelude, and the corresponding return from the subdominant to the tonic in the second half.

I	mm. 0 ₂ -12 ₂	tonic to tonic relative (F minor to A _♭ major)
II	mm. 12 ₂ -24 ₂	tonic relative confirmed
	mm. 24 ₂ -28 ₂	tonic relative confirmed again
III	mm. 28 ₂ -40 ₂	modulation to the subdominant B _♭ minor
IV	mm. 40 ₂ -48 ₂	return to the tonic with imperfect cadence
V	mm. 48 ₂ -60 ₂	interrupted cadence in the home key
	mm. 60 ₂ -62 ₂	plagal cadence in the home key
	mm. 62 ₂ -66 ₂	home key confirmed
	mm. 66 ₂ -70 ₂	home key confirmed again

The rhythmic pattern is based on a regular use of eighth-notes and 16th-notes and can thus be called simple. The pitch pattern, on the other hand, contains much variation in the different phrases: there are stepwise passages, many broken-chord figures, as well as large intervals, the latter occurring both in the 16th-notes and in the eighth-notes.

The character must be determined as a borderline case. Rhythm and intervals point to a lively character, but the abundant use of appoggiaturas indicates an emotional intensity that places a restraint on the tempo.

Articulation and touch must be mindful of the various components of the material: A neutral tone quality is appropriate for all quarter-notes that represent a cadential bass or should be distinguished from rhythmically interlocking yet melodically more relevant note-groups in another voice and for all eighth-notes followed by rests in complementary-rhythm patterns.¹ Non legato with a more singing touch is required for all quarter-notes and eighth-notes that form melodic lines. Legato with high-intensity touch is indispensable in all appoggiatura-resolution pairs and also applies in the closing formulas.² Quasi legato with a light touch is a good choice for the 16th-notes in the toccata-style complementary patterns (see mm. 4-8 etc.).

The score contains five ornaments, all of them mordents. Those in mm. 40, 42, and 69 are approached in stepwise motion and therefore begin on the main note. A simple shake with three notes is sufficient here. The ones in mm. 45 and 46 are preceded by a large leap. They therefore begin on the upper neighbor note and feature a four-note shake.

The F-minor prelude is built not on single-voiced units in a polyphonic texture but from homophonic cells that develop into short phrases. Each is at first presented in its own unique texture before there is a vivid exchange and interplay of accompanying features. (Although these cells are thus not motifs, the customary “M” will be used for easy reference.)

M1 is presented in the first four measures. The lowest of its three voices features quarter-notes in cadential steps. The upper and middle voices run in parallels. Their core consists of an appoggiatura-resolution pair in eighth-notes preceded by an upbeat in the shape of an anticipation of the appoggiatura. Owing to the melodic parallel and to the appoggiaturas, each of the one-measure patterns is high in emotional intensity. The entire four-measure motif forms a dynamic curve. The tension increases to m. 3₁ where the subdominant harmony coincides with the sudden leap in the pitch level of the upper voice. The ensuing decrease is expressed, in the lower voice by the chromatic transition to the dominant, and in the two higher voices by a gradual descent.

M2 presents a toccata-pattern. The left-hand strong beats are complemented by three 16th-notes in the right hand. The pitches of both voices interlock, giving the impression of a single layer in broken-chord figures.

¹Neutral non legato: mm. 1-4 (L), 4-8 (M), 8-16, 20-24, 28-32 (L), 52-56 (U+M), 56-58 (M).

²Appoggiaturas requiring intense legato may come in parallels (U+M: mm. 1-4, 9-16, 28, 29-32, 40, and 57), grow single-voiced out of a suspension (M: m. 34 and U: mm. 36), appear single-voiced without a marking (U: mm. 37, 38, 45, and 46, L: 49, 51, and 52, and U+M: m. 70) or slurred (U: mm. 42 and 44). For a closing formula in legato see U: m. 39.

There could hardly be a more obvious contrast between the textures of M1 and M2. The melodic content of M2 is negligible: the left-hand notes owe their melodic value more to their metric position on strong beats than to the consistency of the line they build. This is not surprising since they are, after all, primarily parts of broken chords. This lack of melodic expression is reflected in the somewhat subdued intensity of this cell and in its lack of direction. Harmonically, these four measures make no progress but extend the C-major chord reached in the middle of m. 4 in an ornamental fashion. The broken-chord figures seem to circle without a goal (see mm. 5-6₂, which recur identically in mm. 7-8₂). Correspondingly, the dynamic tension is as if suspended. Neither build-up nor relaxation is called for.

M3 appears in mm. 20₂-24₂. The texture displays once again three voices, each of them essentially independent of the other. What makes the interplay nevertheless so simple is the regular rhythm and the one-measure sequential pattern. Each of these one-measure units contains a rising step in quarter-notes in the lower voice, a syncopated falling third ending on a weak beat in the middle voice, and a curve made up of rising and falling broken-chord 16th-notes in the upper voice. Harmonically, each middle beat represents an inverted seventh-chord followed in the ensuing measure not by its resolution but by another extended triad, now in root position (mm. 20₂-24₁: A_♭⁷-D_♭⁹, g⁷-c⁹, f⁷-B_♭⁹, E_♭⁷-A_♭⁹). The entire phrase conveys the impression of a long release of tension.

The next four measures seem different at first glance. They can, however, be regarded as a combination of M2 and M3. The complementary rhythm of the lower and middle voices appears in a different guise from M3, but the broken-chord figures in the upper voice resemble those in M2. Harmonically, the phrase is distinguished by a high content of accidentals (see particularly the F_♭ and C_♭ in mm. 26-27). Although the melodic direction, as in M3, is descending, this variant expresses an increase to m. 27 followed only then by a relaxation.

M4 only emerges in mm. 40₂-42₂. The upper-voice contour consists of a two-measure unit, the longest unit in this prelude and also the one that is melodically the most eloquent. The dynamic shape shows a curve in which the climax falls on the appoggiatura. The middle and lower voices are combined here in the hidden two-part structure of the left-hand part. The melodic lower voice contrasts the eloquent upper-voice unit with a descent in eighth-notes (C-B_♭-A_♭-G-F-E_♭), while the middle-voice part of the hidden two-part structure adds a pedal on D followed by a broken G-minor chord as harmonic backdrop. M4 is followed by one complete and two varied partial sequences, and complemented by an imperfect cadence.

The following table lists the prelude's material in order to show what correspondences hide behind the many variants. Strongly diverging variants are marked with an asterisk, developments with the "plus" sign.

mm. 0 ₂ -12 ₂	M1, M2, M1.....	mm. 28 ₂ -40 ₂	M1, M2, M1*	<i>f/p/f</i>
	inserted:	mm. 40 ₂ -48 ₂	M4	<i>mf</i>
mm. 12 ₂ -20 ₂	M1, M2	mm. 48 ₂ -56 ₂	M1*, M2*	<i>f/p</i>
	inserted:	mm. 56 ₂ -62 ₂	M1+	<i>f</i>
mm. 20 ₂ -28 ₂	M3, M3/M2	mm. 62 ₂ -70	M3, M3/M2	<i>mf</i>

WTC II/12 in F minor – Fugue

The material of the F-minor fugue has a dance-like character. Bach achieves this primarily through the persuasive rhythm and pitch pattern in the subject's head: upbeat + triple repetition, upbeat + triple repetition. These two immediately remembered initial measures are complemented by two measures of unobtrusive running notes. The end of the subject is reached, as can be expected of such a regular phrase, after precisely four measures. The only irregularity arises in the two possible endings Bach invents for this subject. There is the strong-beat ending (a "male" ending in the terminology taken from Greek poetic meter) in which the melodic line concludes with a return to the tonic harmony on the downbeat of a statement's fourth measure (see, e.g., in m. 32). Much more frequent is the weak-beat (or "female") ending, which extends this tonic through two more eighth-notes and thus achieves a more perfect complement to the subject's 1/8 upbeat.

While the first upbeat + triple-repetition group should be separated from its varied sequence by phrasing, the final note of the sequence (the third E in m. 2) doubles as the beginning of the running notes and does not allow for another cut. The subject thus consists of a short first subphrase and a much longer second one. The rhythmic pattern, in the subject itself as well as in the fugue as a whole, is simple, consisting primarily of eighth- and 16th-notes. In the pitch pattern, the most noteworthy characteristics of this subject are the leap and broken chord respectively linking the two upbeats to their subsequent downbeats (F-C = perfect fifth, D_b-B_b-E = extract of C⁹ chord) and the triple note repetition. The remaining 16th-notes move almost exclusively in stepwise motion.

The subject's harmonic layout is also straightforward: the tonic on the downbeats of mm. 1 and 4 surrounds the dominant in mm. 2 and 3. The subdominant appears in a metrically weak position (m. 1, last eighth-note) and thus does not gain momentum. Yet as it marks the only fast harmonic change in this subject (with only one eighth-note between its appearance and the change to the dominant), it endows the beginning of the second subphrase with a sense of slightly heightened urgency. The dynamic development reflects



these features. In the short initial subphrase, the downbeat, prepared by the bouncing upbeat, is distinctly accented. The relationship between upbeat and downbeat is enhanced in the sequence, where the first E is even more prominent than the first F had been. While the note repetition in the first subphrase brings about an immediate release, the length of the second subphrase now requires a gradual diminuendo. (Emotional “waves” in m. 3 should be avoided so as not to blur the subject's structure and character.)

The F-minor fugue comprises nine subject statements.

- | | | | | | |
|--------------|---|--------------|---|--------------|---|
| 1. mm. 0-4 | U | 4. mm. 24-28 | U | 7. mm. 50-54 | M |
| 2. mm. 4-8 | M | 5. mm. 28-32 | M | 8. mm. 71-75 | U |
| 3. mm. 11-15 | L | 6. mm. 40-44 | L | 9. mm. 74-78 | M |



Apart from the interval adjustment in the answer (as is common in fugues whose subject begins with a fifth, this interval is converted into a fourth to retain the tonality) and the above-mentioned “female” and “male” endings, the subject remains unchanged. No inversions occur, and the only overlap of consecutive statements (mm. 74-75) is so minimal that it is not perceived as a stretto. Moreover, Bach has not invented a single counter-subject for this fugue. There are six subject-free passages.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| E1 mm. 8 ₂ -11 ₂ | E3 mm. 32 ₁ -40 ₂ | E5 mm. 54 ₁ -71 ₂ |
| E2 mm. 15 ₂ -24 ₂ | E4 mm. 44 ₂ -50 ₂ | E6 mm. 78 ₁ -85 |

Four of these episodes are subdivided. We should distinguish E2a/b (mm. 15₂-17₁-24₂), E3a/b (mm. 32₁-33₁-40), E4a/b (mm. 44₂-46₂-50₂), and E5a/b (mm. 54₁-66₁-71₂). The subject's tail figures in episodes that begin as subject prolongations, as happens in E2a (descending sequences), E3a (twofold imitation), and E4a (a rising two-measure sequence). The subject's head with extending sequences is used as a motif in E5. Genuine episode material is limited to one sequence model and one small motif.

The motif is first heard with sequences in the lower voice of E4b and taken up once at the outset of E5a, with an imitation. The sequence model, introduced in mm. 17-18, quotes the subject's note repetition in double thirds with an ornamental extension in the upper voice against quasi-melodic curves in 16th- and eighth-notes in the lower voice. E2b continues with two descending sequences, one faithful, the other varied and extended. In the structurally corresponding E3b the upper and middle voices are inverted and the extension of the second sequence is slightly modified. Another analogous episode is E6, while E5b is shortened in its second sequence.

The relationships between the episodes are manifold and revealing for the structural layout. Note particularly the four larger passages that correspond with one another while being distinguished from their surroundings by texture owing to the three-part model: E2b \approx E3b \approx E5b \approx E6. All have harmonically concluding endings. These are thematically open in mm. 24 and 71 but characterized by closing formulas in mm. 39-40 and 84-85. Performers may wish to consider setting the distinct sequence models in the four corresponding blocks apart from the remainder of the fugue by choosing a different color.³

E2b and E3b are prepared by analogous episode segments that extend a preceding entry, whereas E5a consists of two corresponding halves. Dynamically, E5a is the only episode that represents truly active increases in the ascending sequences of the subject head. (One might have a point in arguing that these make up for the missing third entry that the balance with section I would require). Only E1 and E4, which are not so distinct in their material and structure, serve as links between two subject statements within a section. Both begin with a slight increase before giving way to relaxation, while all other episodes represent a decreasing tendency.

The thematic leaps and broken chords as well as the simplicity of the rhythm indicate a rather lively basic character. The tempo should be fast enough to create the effect of a true 2/4 meter, with only one strong beat in each measure, and to guarantee the light character in the 16th-notes. The relative tempo of the prelude to the fugue needs careful planning. A simple proportion of quarter-note = quarter-note (and thus: measure = measure) may sound dull. A complex proportion, while more difficult to imagine, gives more satisfactory results for each of the two pieces. It implies using

³Having the second manual of a harpsichord in mind may help. On modern pianos, one can shade the fingers' soft touch in these segments by depressing the left pedal. This gives an effect that is both convincing in terms of the structure of this fugue and in keeping with Baroque performance practice. Exact timing of the left-foot pedal is, of course, essential.

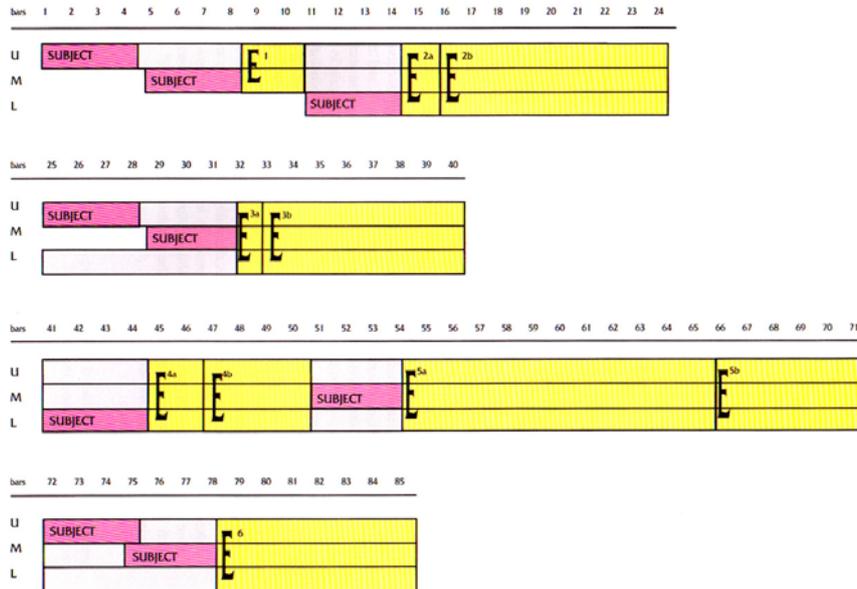
a note value that does not literally occur, the triplet eighth-note, as a base: one triplet eighth-note in prelude tempo corresponds with one eighth-note in the fugue. (Approximate metronome settings: prelude beats = 66, fugue beats = 100.) The appropriate articulation includes non legato for the eighth-notes and a crisp legato for the 16th-notes. The non legato may sound bouncing in the subject itself, slightly less assertive in the secondary material, and particularly gentle in the sequence models.

The only ornament suggested in the score appears, in parentheses, on the first down-beat note of the first subject entry. If played, it must be added to all other complete entries. An ornament that is not indicated even in brackets but which almost all performers will intuitively add is the (four-note) cadential mordent on the dotted G in m. 84.

The structure of this fugue is very clear, as can already be seen from the outline and function of the episodes. The four corresponding episode segments each conclude a section. As they end with different degrees of melodic conclusiveness, the impression arises that sections I+II and sections III+IV form the two larger blocks of a binary design. This concept is supported by the observation that the first and third sections contain bridging episodes between their entries, while the second and fourth sections do not. The following table visualizes the correspondences.

section I:	section III:
subject in U, M, + E1 (linking)	subject in L + E4 (linking)
subject in L + E2a (short opening)	subject in M + E5a (long opening)
E2b (sequence model; no closing formula)	E5b (sequence model; no closing formula)
section II:	section IV:
subject in U, M	subject in U, M
E3a (short opening)	—
E3b (sequence model + closing formula)	E6 (sequence model + closing formula)

The harmonic plan supports the binary layout in that both the first and third sections set out from the tonic. The developments inside each half of the fugue, however, are different: Section I contains three statements in the field of the tonic, after which E2 modulates to E \flat major (the dominant of the tonic relative A \flat major). The second section is held in the major mode, with its two entries in A \flat and E \flat major respectively. E3a then modulates to C minor, and E3b closes in C major (the dominant). The two statements of the third section are both on the tonic, after which E5 ends on an F⁷ chord (the dominant of the subdominant B \flat minor). The fourth section features entries on the subdominant and tonic and thus closes the circle.



The dynamic development from one entry to the next is not the foremost intent in this fugue. In section I, the tension rises throughout the three entries (the dynamic curve in the bridging episodes constituting no interruption but just a suspension) and then diminishes gradually through the concluding episode E2. Correspondingly in section III, the tension increases through two entries (suspended during E4) and again in the sequences of the subject head, before it subsides gradually throughout the concluding E5. In both cases, the harmonic ending on the dominant of the key in which the subsequent section will set out creates further release and thus mollifies the beginning of sections II and IV. The reduced texture supports this, as the entry in mm. 24-28 appears manifestly (and that in mm. 71-75 practically) in two-part setting. In both cases, the final subject statement is placed in the middle voice, the most subdued of the three possible positions. Any growth in tension that might be brought forward by the increase in texture is thus annihilated, and sections II and IV remain much less outgoing than sections I and III. The concluding episodes E3 and E6 end both halves of the fugue on a soft note.