

WTC II/16 in G minor – Prelude

This prelude turns around rhythmic patterns. In fact, one rhythmic figure defines practically the entire composition. This figure appears in numerous melodic guises. Among them, we can isolate a small number of recurring models. Now in one voice alone, now in two complementary voices, they create a continuity of the dotted rhythm that is almost unbroken throughout the prelude.



The first harmonic progression closes at m. 2₁ where the initial return to the home key materializes. This cadential close coincides with the end of the initial model and thus does not have larger structural bearing. The modulation launched shortly thereafter leads to the subdominant C minor, reached with a cadential formula at m. 5₁. This closure should be regarded as structurally relevant, not least because of the recurrence of the initial model thereafter (mm. 5-6 ≈ mm. 1-2).

The prelude comprises six sections grouped into two larger parts:

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|-----|------------------------|---------------------------|
| I | mm. 1-5 ₁ | tonic to subdominant |
| II | mm. 5-9 ₁ | subdominant to dominant |
| III | mm. 9-11 ₁ | dominant back to tonic |
| IV | mm. 11-13 ₂ | tonic to subdominant |
| V | mm. 13-20 ₁ | subdominant back to tonic |
| VI | mm. 20-21 | tonic confirmed |

The G-minor prelude is one of only three works among the 48 preludes and 48 fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* featuring an initial tempo indication.¹ There must be a good reason for *Largo* to be marked here. It could be Bach's warning against treating the continuous dotted rhythm in too lively a manner. The tempo is thus measured in slow quarter-notes, and the mood can correspondingly be described as stately, grave, or solemn. The appropriate articulation is an overall legato. This applies to all voices, be they melodically relevant or mere accompaniment like the ascending eighth-notes in m. 2. The usual exceptions in cadential-bass patterns occur here only in mm. 8-9 and 19-20. In all other cases they seem conscientiously avoided by ties that make detached playing impossible (see mm. 4-5, 10-11, and 12-13).

¹The others are the B-minor fugue I/24 (*Largo*) and the B-minor prelude II/24 (*Allegro*).

A number of ornaments are to be considered. Two melodic mordents appear in the first measure. Both are approached stepwise, thus beginning on the main note and encompassing only a simple three-note shake. These ornaments recur in the sequence of m. 2. Beyond that, they are not specifically indicated but, as thematically integrated embellishments, should be transferred to all further entries of the model (i.e., to mm. 5, 6 and 9). The remaining ornaments appear almost arbitrary as they are neither melodically induced nor attached to cadential formulas. Their execution poses no problem: both the inverted mordent in m. 11 and the mordent in m. 15, which is approached stepwise, are three-note embellishments, while that in m. 8 is a four-note ornament launched from the upper neighboring note. The only pre-beat ornament in this composition, the inverted mordent E_b -D- E_b in the middle of the final measure, is written out, as seen in the 32nd-notes in m. 21₂.

As the rhythmic pattern in this prelude is so uniform, all attention is captured by the melodic contours and the texture. Two different textural levels can be distinguished. One is the complementary interplay between a melodic voice and a short insert in an adjacent voice. These quasi-polyphonic features will be dealt with when the models are discussed. The other level is realized by the pedal notes which, only occasionally hidden behind rhythmic patterns, pervade the entire piece. Together with the six cadences, these pedal notes constitute the backbone of the composition. The only measures not rooted in pedal notes present a feature that is equally suited to create large-scale contexts: a gradually descending peak-note line in the uppermost voice linking the root of the subdominant chord (C) to that of the tonic (G). The following example shows a version of the bass line that is analytically simplified to facilitate structural understanding, the section ending cadences, and the peak note line:

The musical score shows a bass line in common time with a key signature of two flats. It is divided into six measures, labeled I through VI. Measure numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, and 21 are indicated below the staff. The score includes a treble clef, a key signature of two flats, and a common time signature. The bass line is simplified to show the structural backbone, including cadences and a peak note line.

The prelude's thematic material is determined by three models. Each of them consists of two or even three voices that combine in a rhythmically complementary way. M1 begins after the initial downbeat in the bass and spans one measure. It consists of a "head," a complement, a climax, and a

“tail.” (Several of these segments recur separately, which is why they are named here.) The “head” M1a aims for E₆, the sixth scale degree that, in the minor mode, represents high tension. The complement M1b ends with a descending tritone, one of the high-tension intervals that in Bach’s time often characterized highly emotional pieces in slow tempo. The climax is marked by the largest interval leap, C-A, which is particularly conspicuous as it emerges from a descending line. The “tail” M1c provides the expected relaxation with a gentle stepwise figure that, were it not for the dotted rhythm, could be read as a written-out turn. The texture of this model can be described as two-part polyphony with a pedal in the lowest voice. The dynamic outline of M1 results from all the details stated. Tension grows in M1a, is enhanced by the tritone in M1b, peaks on the high A, and resolves in the gentle curve of M1c. The model is imitated a fifth up in mm. 2-3.² It also recurs in mm. 5-6₁, 6-7₁ (with additional filling voices and the “complement” now in the lowest part), and in mm. 9-10₁. M1a, the head alone, is quoted several times; see mm. 7-8₁ (4x), mm. 8-9 (as a link at the end of the cadence), mm. 11-12₁ (3x), m. 16 (2x), mm. 17₃-18₃ (4x, a varied transposition of mm. 7-8₁). M1b recurs in two crucial positions: in mm. 15-16 it marks the beginning of the peak note line and in m. 19 its end. M1c exerts its soothing power as one of the complements to M2 (see below). Moreover it also appears in connection with the beginning and end of the peak-note line (twice in m. 15, once in m. 19).

M2 is introduced in mm. 3-4₁. It is related to M1 in two ways: its final figure (see mm. 3-4: D-A-C-B) quotes M1a and its second complement (see m. 3, “alto”: G-F#-E-F#) takes up M1c, both transposed into a major-mode context. Easily overlooked upon first reading is the rhythm of the first complement (“tenor”: m. 3₁₋₂), which replaces, for the first time in the piece, the second 32nd-note of the rhythmic unit with a 16th-note. The two complements in different voices give the impression that this model is set in three-part polyphonic texture over the pedal D in the lowest part. The dynamic design of M2 is once again a simple curve, with the climax here on beat 3 where C appears as the apex of the leading line. Owing to a lack in high-tension intervals, this curve is much gentler than that in M1. M2 is sequenced in mm. 4-5₁ a fourth up and recurs in mm. 10-11₁. In these two measures, the principal voice and its main complement are note-identical but the former pedal in the bass now takes a more active part.

²As the notation in m. 2 reveals, the uppermost voice in m. 1 is not the highest to appear in this piece. A neat distinction of voices is, however, not very meaningful since Bach has not conceived this prelude in consistent part writing.

M3 first appears in mm. 13₂-14₂. In the leading voice, two four-note figures appear combined to a single broken-chord pattern that climaxes on the syncopated D. The motif is accompanied by a free parallel and complemented during the syncopation by a little duet in “alto” and “tenor.” Its sequence is even more intense, representing the first and only passage in the prelude to sound in consistent four-part texture.

The prelude’s structure can be described as follows:

- Section I is thematically active. It presents M1 and M2, both with an immediate recurrence. Section II recalls, in its first half, M1 with its imitation. Its second half quotes only segments of the models.
- Section III, with two measures half as long as the previous ones, presents a contracted version of section I and therefore appears slightly more intense than section II. Section IV, almost as brief, like the latter half of section II quotes only segments of the models.
- Section V appears as a new beginning with a new model. Its importance is underlined with the strongest crescendo in the piece and its extended scope with a peak-note line. Section VI is but a coda.

The two tripartite blocks of the harmonic design are thus counteracted by the three binary blocks of the thematic and dynamic layout.

WTC II/16 in G minor – Fugue

Beginning on the second beat in 3/4 time, the subject of this fugue spans a little over four measures. It concludes after an appoggiatura and its ornamented resolution on the first 16th-note of the second beat in m. 4. Both the pitch of the first note, the fifth degree of the G-minor scale, and the unusual rhythmic beginning on a weak-beat quarter-note followed by a rest create a feeling of elevated tension on the very first note of the fugue and thus discredit our usual notion of a weak-beat beginning as upbeat.

After this unique opening, the phrase unfolds in the most regular pattern. The three subsequent downbeats are each prepared by an eighth-note anacrusis in sequencing intervals of ascending fourths (B_b-E_b, A-D, and G-C). While the second of these upbeats opens a subphrase that is the exact transposition of the one preceding it, the third initiates a unit with internal extension: the upbeat’s target C is expanded by means of a seven-fold note repetition up to the next downbeat. There it turns into the above-mentioned appoggiatura and then descends to its ornamented resolution (C—[B_b-A]-B_b).

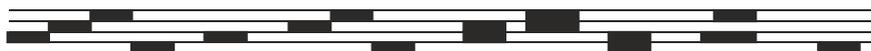
The rhythmic pattern within the subject is dominated by eighth-notes and quarter-notes. While the counter-subjects and all motifs add 16th-notes and occasional dotted notes, an overall impression of rhythmic simplicity remains. The pitch pattern is characterized by leaps and note repetitions in the longer note values, and by ornamental figures and scalar passages in the 16th-notes (see, e.g., the inverted-mordent figures at mm. 5₃, 6₃, 7₃ and the chain of written-out mordents in m. 8). Bach's harmonization shows a swift harmonic change on the initial syncopation followed by measure-by-measure cadential steps.



The dynamic outline, too, is simple. Launched from the fifth degree, i.e., from raised tension, the climax falls on m. 2₁, which represents both the peak of the descending sequences and the subdominant harmony. The overall tension then decreases gradually through the smaller climaxes of the ensuing subphrases (mm. 3₁ and 4₁) and finds a perfect release onto the tonic's third at m. 5₂.

The G-minor fugue comprises the following 17 subject statements.

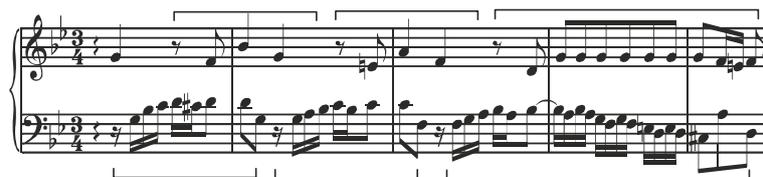
1.	mm. 1-5	T	9.	mm. 45-49	T
2.	mm. 5-9	A	10.	mm. 45-49	A
3.	mm. 9-13	S	11.	mm. 51-55	A
4.	mm. 13-17	B	12.	mm. 51-56	S
5.	mm. 20-24	T	13.	mm. 59-63	B
6.	mm. 28-32	A	14.	mm. 59-63	T
7.	mm. 32-36	S	15.	mm. 67-69 (75)	T
8.	mm. 36-40	B	16.	mm. 69-73 (75)	S
			17.	mm. 79-83	B



The modifications the subject undergoes in the course of its 17 entries are rather unusual. Instead of strettos there are four statement parallels. Modifications of shape include common processes like the adjustment of the initial interval in the answer (mm. 5, 13, and 36) but also the surprising variation of all upbeats in the final entry. The subject's tail appears in various forms: shortened to an unornamented beat-one resolution (A: mm. 32 and 49) or emerging from a note repetition with tie prolongation and subsequent diverted resolution (m. 36), with a varied extension of the note repetition (A: m. 55) or with a newly ornamented resolution (A: m. 56 and T: m. 63). Besides the free variations of the ending in the parallel subject

entries (see mm. 55-56: S and m. 63: B), the most drastic modifications occur in mm. 67-75. The soprano statement, after beginning regularly in mm. 69-72, features a delayed resolution which, enveloped in the metric pattern of a hemiola, finds its satisfactory conclusion only at the end of a cadential formula at m. 75₁. The preceding tenor statement can either be read as shortened (i.e. without the entire final subphrase, in which case it would break off on the second beat of m. 69), or, more likely, as extended in its middle by two extra sequences (see mm. 67-68 sequenced in 68-69, 69-70, and 70-71) and then complemented by a free and again very much extended version of the final subphrase.

Bach invents only one true counter-subject for this fugue. Introduced in mm. 5-9 in the tenor, it displays a phrase structure strikingly similar to that of the “subject without its initial note”: a one-measure subphrase is followed by two descending sequences the second of which is extended to two-measure length. The brackets in the example mark this similarity:



The almost parallel design of subject and counter-subject permits little independence in the dynamic layout. All one can do to maintain a certain degree of distinction is to place the climax in each of the counter-subject's subphrases on the inverted mordents. The tie in mm. 7-8 supports this solution which, were it not for the sake of more polyphonic clarity, would appear somewhat unusual from a metric point of view.

The fugue contains eight subject-free passages.

E1	mm. 17-20	E5	mm. 56-59
E2	mm. 24-28	E6	mm. 63-67
E3	mm. 40-45	E7	mm. 75-79
E4	mm. 49-51	E8	mm. 83-84

The subject-free passages feature three explicit cadential formulas, ending on the subdominant (E3, mm. 44-45), the dominant (E6, mm. 66-67: imperfect cadence), and the tonic (E8, mm. 83-84). The short final episode consists entirely of a cadential close. In E3, the close in C minor displays a suspension. Its resolution onto the third overlaps with the ensuing subject entry (see A: m. 45). In E6, the incomplete harmonic progression ends without any suspension.

E6 is related to E8 in another way, one that distinguishes both from the fugue's other subject-free passages. Instead of moving from the clearly discernible ending of the preceding subject entries to the typical episode motif, E6 and E8 unfold almost imperceptibly as extensions of the preceding S/CS parallel. The varied subject tail in the tenor, which substitutes the note repetition + inverted-mordent figure by a four-note mordent, is sequenced in such a way as to form an imitation of the threefold mordent figure characterizing the counter-subject's fourth measure. At the same time, the bass imitates the preceding soprano descent. The following two measures mix further imitation of the threefold mordent with a sequence, in the bass, of the varied subject ending.

In all other episodes, the characteristic opening of the counter-subject, which will be referred to as Mcs, plays a major role. The three-note ascent followed by the inverted mordent figure (from T: mm. 5 or 6) is complemented in various ways. The other parts active in each episode present various figures that are either sequenced or imitated but often not taken up again at any other instance in the fugue. Phrasing and local dynamics are essential in shaping these episode components.³

The role each episode plays in the overall dynamic development is determined by the direction of sequences and imitations. E1 presents a two-fold relaxation (mm. 17-19₁ and, overlapping in the soprano, mm. 19-20). E2 is conceived with ascending sequences, thus creating a slight increase in tension. E3 appears as a dynamic curve. An initial increase, which is straightforward owing to the fact that all voices join in the ascending sequences (mm. 40-43), is followed by a decrease and complete release in the first explicit cadential close. E4 links two consecutive parallel statements in increasing tendency, while E5 with its descending sequences and falling chromatic lines creates a decrease. In E6, the tension grows throughout the partial sequences of the preceding statement, only letting up in the approach to the imperfect cadence. After the soprano statement's cadential extension, E7 begins more softly than any of the previous episodes but builds up even more power, in immediate preparation for the ensuing final subject statement.

This fugue's basic character is conceived as rather lively on account of the uncomplicated rhythm and the contours featuring leaps, note repeti-

³The bass line in E1 begins after phrasing in m. 17 with the 16th-note D. There follow a climax at m. 17₃, phrasing in m. 18₂ after E₁, another climax in m. 18₃, and another phrasing in m. 19₁, etc. In E2 the climaxes fall on T: m. 24₃, S: m. 25₃, T: m. 26₃, and S: m. 27₃; in E7 on B: m. 75₂, S: m. 75₃, T: m. 76₁, A: m. 76₂, S+T: m. 76₃, and S+B: m. 77₂.

tions, and ornamental figures. The articulation requires quasi legato for all melodic 16th-notes except for written-out ornaments, which should be legato, and non legato for all eighth- and quarter-notes. It is a good idea to distinguish the quality of touch in the cadential versus the melodic eighth-notes (e.g., in B: mm. 9 and 24-28). Note-pairs consisting of appoggiatura and resolution are always legato; this applies also to the tied prolongations in mm. 14 and 15. Phrasing (e.g., T: in m. 10 after A, m. 11 after G, m. 14 after A, and m. 15 after G) is best expressed through dynamic means.

The tempo of this fugue is moderately fast. The 16th-notes provide the measure for an appropriate pace: they should be swift enough to convey their ornamental character but not so brisk as to jeopardize their melodic quality. Transparency must be guaranteed as well as the possibility for unhurried phrasing between 16th-notes (as is demanded, e.g., at the juncture of subject ending and counter-subject beginning). The tempo proportion between the prelude and the fugue uses larger metric units for translation: a quarter-note in the prelude corresponds with a whole measure in the fugue. Approximate metronome settings: prelude beats = 28 (eighth-notes = 56), fugue beats = 84.

The only ornament symbol in the score is found in m. 21. The mordent is approached stepwise. It thus begins on the main note and consists of a single three-note shake. Beginning this shake with two 32nd-notes, so that the return to the main note falls on the bass note C, represents a perfectly acceptable and clear solution. The rendition of the ornament as a triplet concluding before the bass motif begins is correct but risks blurring.

In terms of its layout, the G-minor fugue falls into two almost equal halves (44 + 40 measures). While this major dividing line is beyond doubt, the distinction between sections in each half appears blurred by contrary information from within the musical text. Here are the details. The first half contains eight subject statements in T A S B T A S B. The episode following the last of these entries describes a self-contained dynamic curve and concludes with a perfect cadence in C minor. The second half presents parallel entries in the three neighboring voice pairs T+A, A+S, and B+T as well as the stretto ^TS with a varied ending. The entering order of the leading voice in each pair, T A B S, is almost identical with the order observed twice in the first half of the fugue.⁴ The final entry in the bass

⁴The leader in a parallel statement is traditionally the one which is placed on the scale degree identical with that of the original subject. Thus in the first pair which is harmonically in F major, the tenor begins correctly on the fifth and carries on accordingly, while the alto, doubling in thirds, does not maintain the original interval structure.

seems the odd one out in several ways: it is the only statement in the fugue that is considerably varied, the only one to contain a harmonically effective modification of the pitch pattern (B±), and it follows after two conspicuous homophonic formulas in hemiola pattern, thus appearing more like a coda. To sum up: Bach introduces a new contrapuntal technique in the second half of the fugue, which he then uses consistently through four entries and four different voice combinations. The single section comprising four parallel statements is then followed by a redundant entry.⁵

In the first half, the repeated entering order suggests two complete rounds of statements, but the texture seems to impart a different message. In mm. 20-24, the tenor statement retains the full four-part ensemble established in the preceding bass entry throughout the subject's first and second subphrases. The ensuing subject statements in alto and soprano, however, appear in reduced ensemble as the bass is resting in mm. 28-36. Yet since neither the harmonic development nor a distinct cadential close support one or the other solution, we can only deduce that Bach chose to leave this boundary ambiguous. What he creates amounts to a double section in which the dividing line can be determined by careful analysis alone but does not constitute, particularly for listeners, a structural caesura. In a way, the composer is thus matching the long section in the fugue's second half with a combined unit in the first.

The development of tension in the fugue's first half thus consists of two increases. Interpreters seeking to emphasize the identical entering order will tone down the second tenor statement despite its initial four-part ensemble, in contrast to those who perceive a beginning of the second section only at the point of textural reduction. The fugue's second half begins with a kind of explosion: in full four-part ensemble and with the

⁵From m. 59 onward, Bach introduces a yet more intensified contrapuntal technique: parallel statements of the counter-subject in addition to parallel statements of the subject. Some analysts take this fact as an indication for the beginning of a new section in m. 59. Others regard the imperfect cadence in mm. 66-67, together with the ensuing thinner texture with only two voices, as a structural caesura. Yet it seems preferable to recognize both features as means employed to create further intensification. We can state a gradual buildup of tension through this long section: it begins with the parallel subject statement, continues in the twofold parallel of subject and counter-subject, and culminates in this same twofold parallel prolonged by a two-measure anticipation of the accompanying parallel voices. The reduced texture in mm. 67-68 thus appears as a short repose before the final triumphant outbreak: the twofold parallel in the home key. The fact that the anticipated subject statement in the tenor appears already in the "expected" key (compare T: mm. 67-68 with S: mm. 69-70) creates an effect as if stretto and twofold parallel were combined.

intensity of parallel statements. The interspersed episodes each set out more softly but soon return to the high intensity level. Only E7 presents a true relaxation before the redundant entry concludes the fugue on a gentle note.

