

WTC II/19 in A major – Prelude

This is a composition in three-part texture. All three voices take an active part in the melodic flow. Although rudimentary imitation is used, parallel motion and complementary interplay is so frequent that one would not speak of a strictly polyphonic piece. The prelude's predominant feature is its very even rhythmic organization. The 12/8 time manifests itself in a constant flow of eighth-notes. All syncopations are complemented by eighth-notes in another voice, thus losing much of their metric power. Together with the fact that the flow of eighth-notes is not once interrupted during the entire composition, this gives the prelude a calm and soothing atmosphere, classifying it as a metrically determined piece of meditative intent.

Explicit closing formulas do not stand out. Instead, all cadential closes melt into the flow of the piece. The home key of A major is first confirmed in m. 3. Both the suspension in the upper voice and the fact that no subdominant has yet appeared make this cadence not eligible as a structural caesura. E major is reached in m. 6 with an imperfect cadence, thus still referring to A major. The secondary key is not truly established until m. 9₇. But even here, the simultaneous beginning of a new line in a higher register does not allow any feeling of decisive melodic closure to arise.

There is one significant structural analogy in this prelude: the opening development in mm. 1-9₇ recurs, transposed and varied, in the two upper voices of mm. 22-30₇, which are inverted. The remaining harmonic sections are grouped around these analogous passages as follows:

- I mm. 1-9₇ tonic to dominant (E major)
- II mm. 9₇-16₁ modulation to the tonic relative (F# minor)
- III mm. 16-22₁ modulation to the subdominant (D major)
- IV mm. 22-31₁ return to the home key (A major)
- V mm. 31-33 tonic confirmed (A major)

This metrically determined prelude is of a rather calm basic character. The effect of tranquility is enhanced by a detail in the pitch pattern that is important for an adequate understanding: almost all flowing eighth-note lines consist of a succession of written-out inverted mordents (or, later, mordents). The A-G#-A and C#-B-C# in the upper voice of m. 1 are pre-beat ornaments embellishing the notes of a broken A-major chord. The initial measures could thus be imagined as in this example:



These pre-beat ornaments are eventually complemented by a few on-beat ornaments. These are also spelled out and involve, in contrast to the ones mentioned above, the only 16th-notes in the prelude. In m. 9₂, the upper voice can be read as a dotted quarter-note F# precede by a grace-note appoggiatura and ornamented with an inverted mordent. In m. 21, the 16th-notes hide a downbeat G₂ adorned with a slide. In view of the ornamental structure of the lines it would be misleading to describe the pitch pattern as consisting of alternating steps and skips, since these unfold on different levels of the melodic process: the skips in the “background” pattern, the steps on the ornamental “surface.”

The tempo of this prelude is calm but flowing: calm enough to avoid any hurried impression (which might be caused particularly owing to the silent finger shifting necessary for perfect legato) and flowing enough to convey the feeling of gently swinging compound 4/4 time rather than creeping eighth-notes. The appropriate articulation is legato in all notes appearing in the upper and middle voices as well as most notes in the lower voice, with the exception of octave leaps (see mm. 2, 5, 15, 23, 26, and 32) and a cadential-bass pattern (m. 30: A-F#-D-E-A) which should be gently detached.

Although it is certainly possible to describe the initial melodic figure of the prelude (explained above as an ornamented broken chord) and to state its recurrences throughout the prelude, such a listing does not truly facilitate an approach to the piece.¹ What Bach presents here are general pitch lines, elaborately decorated but basically simple. They can be described as follows:

¹The figure recurs in its original version in

U: mm.	1 2 3			20	22 23	27 28	31 32/33
M: mm.	1 2	6 7	11 12	20	22 23 24		32
L: mm.	3	6 7	11 12/13	16		27 28	32
and additionally in inversion in							
U: mm.		9 10		19			
M: mm.		10					31
L: mm.		9 10		17 19	21		30

Section I

mm.	1-4 ₁ rising	4-6 ₁ falling	6-8 ₁ rising	8-9 ₇ falling
	U: C#-D-E-F#	U: F#-E-D-C#-B	M/L	U/M/L

Section II

mm.	9 ₇ -13 ₁	13-15 ₁	15-16 ₁
	falling	rising	falling

Section III

mm.	16-20 ₁	20-21 ₁	21-22 ₁
	falling	rising	falling

Section IV

mm.	22-25 ₁	25-27 ₁	27-29 ₁	29-31 ₁
	rising	falling	rising	falling

Section V

mm.	31-33
	rising

Material and layout make it easy to identify section IV as a recapitulation of section I and section V as the coda. Yet whether it is meaningful, or even necessary, to declare sections II and III as development, remains arguable. Structure, just like thematic material, is but a secondary issue in this piece. The dynamic realization can follow the essential pitch lines traced above. Thus rising lines would be expressed in gentle crescendo, falling lines in diminuendo. The basic tone color, however, remains the same throughout the prelude. There are no contrasts and no moments of dramatic tension, as implied by the “calm and soothing” impression this piece conveys.

WTC II/19 in A major – Fugue

The subject spans 1½ measures in 4/4 time. Beginning, after an eighth-note rest, on the keynote A, it concludes at m. 2₃ where C# represents the resolution of the preceding dominant into the tonic. The contour features several small curves winding around a larger line. Understanding this is vital for perceiving the phrase as an indivisible unit. Comprehending the ornamental character of the notes embellishing this curve is also essential for a correct evaluation of the subject’s many chromatic alterations in the course of the fugue.

The rhythmic pattern, both in the subject itself and in the fugue as a whole, is simple. The basic features are chains of 16th-notes and dotted-note groups. These two frequently combine in such a way that the 16th-note pulse appears as the result two parts in complementary dotted-note groups (see mm. 5, 7-8, 10, 12, 20, 24, and 28 where the effect of uninterrupted 16th-notes is achieved by the interplay of the accompanying voices with the subject).

The subject's harmonic background is basically simple, although the ornamental curves and their syncopations add spots of flavor and tension.

I V⁷ iii vi IV V⁷ I

I V⁷ I IV V I

The music example shows the subject as Bach presents it at the opening of the fugue and below it the underlying large-scale curve; both marked with an interpretation of the main harmonic steps.

The dynamic design follows the simple phrase structure with

an increase throughout the first measure, a climax on the second syncopation, and a subsequent relaxation. The syncopation on the last eighth-note of m. 1 captures the highest amount of tension: it stands harmonically for the subdominant, i.e., the most active step in the simple cadence, and metrically for the only downbeat in this subject, an important fact in a composition where meter, owing to the characteristics of the rhythmic pattern, plays a decisive role.

There are ten subject statements in this fugue.

1. mm. 1-2 ₃	L	6. mm. 12-13 ₃	M
2. mm. 2 ₃ -4 ₁	M	7. mm. 16-17 ₃	L
3. mm. 5-6 ₃	U	8. mm. 20-21 ₃	U
4. mm. 7-8 ₃	L	9. mm. 23 ₃ -25 ₁	M
5. mm. 9 ₃ -11 ₁	U	10. mm. 27 ₃ -29 ₁	U

The subject undergoes only two kinds of modifications in the course of the fugue: extensions at the phrase beginning and chromatic alterations in the ornamental 16th-notes. The pair of 16th-notes initially launching the subject is extended from m. 9 onward to three notes. The additional 16th-note precedes the original beginning either by a leading-note (mm. 9, 20, and 27) or by a rising fourth interval (mm. 12, 16, and 23). Alterations within the 16th-notes that do not arise from transposition (as is the case in

mm. 12-13) involve the third and the fourth scale degrees (mm. 20-21: $G\sharp/G\sharp/G\sharp/G\sharp$, mm. 23-24: $G\sharp/G\sharp/G\sharp$, and m. 28: $D\sharp/D\sharp/D\sharp/D\sharp$). There are no inversions, strettos, or parallel statements.

Neither does Bach invent a regular companion to the subject that would display a minimal degree of independence. Instead, the subject comes accompanied by several kinds of rhythmically varied parallels. The most frequent pattern moves in thirds below the simplified curve (M: mm. 5-6, 9-10, 20-21, and 27-28) or in sixths above it (U: mm. 23-24). The quarter-note values are broken into dotted-note groups that split the pitch into note repetitions (mm. 5-6, 9-10, and 27-28) or add chromatic semitones (mm. 20-21 and 23-24). Interestingly, such parallels only ever occur between the upper and middle voices. There is only one lower-voice entry that incites a parallel. Yet this is even more explicit than the previously mentioned ones as it involves more fractions of the ornamental pattern in the subject (see m. 7: L + M).

In four of the previously identified cases (mm. 5-6, 9-10, 20-21, and 27-28), the lower voice adds a further double-third parallel to the subject's quarter-notes on beats 3, 4, and 1. As a result, this stretch sounds in parallel triads—an extremely rare phenomenon in a genre renowned for complex polyphony. This further parallel also comes in a dotted-note rhythm, with the splitting appearing as a note repetition, an octave displacement, or a chromatic semitone. The following comparison of one of the excerpts with its simplified version shows these parallels:

The image shows two musical staves for mm. 5-6. The left staff is the original score, featuring a complex texture with multiple voices and ornaments. The right staff is a simplified version, showing parallel triads indicated by a tilde symbol (~). The simplified version consists of two staves, with the upper staff containing a sequence of notes and the lower staff containing a sequence of notes that form parallel triads with the upper staff.

mm. 5-6

The fugue encompasses nine subject-free passages.

E1	mm. 4-5 ₁	E6	mm. 17 ₃ -20 ₁
E2	mm. 6 ₃ -7 ₁	E7	mm. 21 ₃ -23 ₃
E3	mm. 8 ₃ -9 ₃	E8	mm. 25 ₃ -27 ₃
E4	mm. 11-12 ₁	E9	m. 29
E5	mm. 13 ₃ -16 ₁		

The most prominent feature in these passages is a motif taken from the end of the subject. It will be referred to as Ms. The layout of the episodes results from the developments of this motif. E1 features descending Ms

sequences above an equally sequenced bass motif. The same combination recurs, with small modifications, in E4 where the Ms sequences appear as an imitative play between the upper and middle voices. Owing to their descending motions, both episodes express decreasing tension. E2 introduces the inversion of Ms. It is accompanied by a three-eighth-note ascent in the lower voice, which in turn is partially paralleled in the middle voice. This combination recurs in E5a where the three-eighth-note ascent appears in the middle voice while the lower voice sustains a short pedal. As both the Ms inversion and the eighth-note-figure express an active gesture, the tension in these two episodes rises. E3 combines descending Ms sequences with a pattern of rhythmically interlocking, descending dotted-note groups. This pattern begins early, anticipating the episode as an accompaniment to the ending of the subject. The same combination recurs in E6a. The three-part descent in these episodes creates a considerable dynamic decline. A complete relaxation is thwarted primarily by the harmonic ending in a dominant-seventh chord.

E7 introduces the parallel motion of Ms. The pattern merges descending sequences in one voice with an imitative pattern in the other two parts. A modification of this combination is found in E8 where the descending sequences intersperse Ms with its inversion, an alternation taken up in the two imitating voices. The overall descent in these two episodes creates another dynamic decline. Of the three remaining episodes, E5b (mm. 14-16₁) displays a certain relationship to E1 or its variant E4. The cadential close it brings forward is ingeniously wrapped in the previously established material. Similarly, E6b (mm. 18₃-20₁) is remotely related to E7 and E8 as it displays varied parallel and contrary-motion statements of Ms. Finally, E9 consists of nothing but a concise cadential formula. Dynamically, E5b extends the progressive tendency of E5a before it approaches the cadential relaxation. Conversely, E6b prepares the subsequent subject statement in an unimpeded upward thrust.

The simplicity of the rhythmic pattern combined with the ornamental impression of the 16th-notes indicates a rather lively basic character. The tempo may be fairly swift, and should by all means be fast enough not to invite listeners to hum along with the 16th-notes.

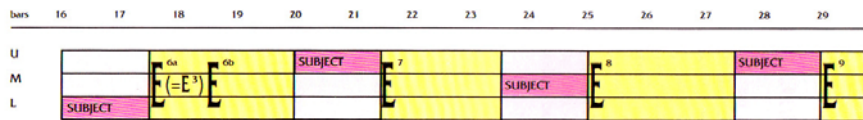
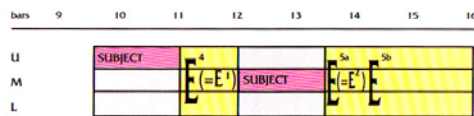
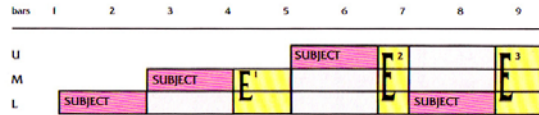
There are two rather different solutions for the tempo proportion between this fugue and its prelude. Performers who emphasize the “flowing” quality of the prelude and thus render the compound beats in a swinging mood equate the larger metric values. This interpretation emphasizes the ornamental character of both pieces and stresses the similarities between them: a dotted quarter-note in the prelude corresponds to a quarter-note in

the fugue. By contrast, performers preferring to focus on the “calm” in the prelude had better establish a metric rapport between the smaller values of both compositions. This interpretation enhances the contrast in prelude and fugue: an eighth-note in the prelude corresponds with an eighth-note in the fugue. (Approximate metronome setting: fugue beats = 90, dotted quarter-notes in the prelude (a) = 90, (b) = 60.)

The appropriate articulation encompasses legato in the 16th-notes and a very merrily bouncing non legato in the simple and dotted eighth-notes. The only exception from the non legato occurs in the closing-formula that accompanies the end of the answer statement (L: mm. 3-4), where E-D#-E must be played legato. The fugue features only one ornament, appearing in brackets in the final measure. It is a point d'arrêt-trill beginning on the upper note, shaking in four 32nd-notes the last of which is tied over (or a 32nd-note triplet followed by an eighth-note syncopation) and resolving (legato) onto the anticipated key note.²

The entering order of the subject statements, together with the fugue's harmonic argument, provides a clear picture of the structural layout. Section I comprises four entries in the home key, the basic round L M U and a redundant statement in L, before closing at m. 9₃ with an imperfect cadence, a V⁷ of F# minor. The two statements of section II sound in the minor mode, in the tonic relative and dominant relative respectively. The analogy of the two episodes E4 and E5a with the first two episodes of section I creates the impression of a structural correspondence between the two sections. This section concludes at m. 16₁ with a perfect cadence in the home key of A major. Section III comprises again four statements, which in this case represent the steps of the simple cadence (L U M U = tonic, subdominant, dominant, tonic). The episodes in this section support the structure in two ways. The initial E6a relates to E3, the final episode of section I. The two corresponding episodes thus create a bracket around the minor-mode middle section. The three longer episodes display a gradual development of the Ms parallel: from the somewhat unruly patterns in E6b via the orderly, only slightly varied parallels in E7 to the complex pattern in E8 with parallels in contrary motion.

²The fact that this ornament appears in brackets should not induce us to think it is optional. This kind of cadential trill was so commonplace in Bach's time that performers would automatically play it even where it was not explicitly stated. Its appearance against running 16th-notes, and the alleged technical problem arising hereof, is no reason for omitting the ornament either. Anyone who can play this fugue in all its required rhythmical accuracy will certainly be able to tackle this trill, particularly if two of the final 32nd-notes in the middle voice (D-C#) are taken over by the left hand.



In the absence of tension-enhancing developments in the subject statements, no dramatic climaxes are built up. By the same token, the close thematic relationship of the episodes with the subject discourages explicit color contrasts between the primary and the secondary material. Instead, the only large-scale shading occurs in the minor-mode middle section, which should sound less brilliant than the surrounding major-mode sections. This is a playful, virtuoso fugue in which joyfulness rather than dramatic developments are the goal.