

WTC II/20 in A minor – Prelude

The prelude in A minor features two halves of equal length and, at first glance, similar layout. This may remind one of the dance movements in Baroque suites. The texture is deceptive: while there is consistent two-part writing with frequent imitation, the voices are only rarely independent of one another. Two significant motifs dominate almost the entire piece. Each comes with a steady accompaniment that swaps voices as the respective motif does, thus impeding any contrapuntal juxtaposition of the two motifs themselves. The prelude can thus be described as motivically determined, or more exactly, determined by two-part motifs in the context of a quasi-independent texture.

Apart from the closure of both halves, all measures are taken up by motivic material, thus not leaving any room for cadential formulas. In addition, an extraordinarily high degree of chromaticism in the leading part of each motif weakens the sense of harmonic progression. Thus the layout is conveyed only by means of structural analogies created by a similar order in the presentation of the motifs.

mm. 1	≈	mm. 8 and	} both transposed, voices inverted, with different bar-to-bar transition
mm. 2-5 ₁	≈	mm. 9-12 ₁	
mm. 5-8 ₁	≈	mm. 13-16 ₁	transposed in inverted voices
mm. 17-19	≈	mm. 21-23	
mm. 1-3 ₃	≈	mm. 25-27 ₃	transposed and varied
mm. 4 + 5	≈	mm. 30 + 31	both transp. / var., voices inverted
mm. 16	≈	mm. 32	

The conclusions to be drawn for a first estimate of the layout are twofold: The first half of the prelude consists of two sections: mm. 1-8 and mm. 9-16. The second half is equally divided, with section III subdivided in itself, while section IV shows traces of a recapitulation. This results in the picture of a ternary form structured as ||: A A':||: B A":||. At the same time, the correspondence of m. 32 with m. 16 supports the impression of binary form, given already by the equal length of the two halves and the repeat signs.

The prelude displays a large variety of note values (eighth-notes, 16th-notes, 32nd-notes, and frequent syncopated eighth-notes) in combination with a high degree of chromaticism. Almost all of the apparent leaps in the thematic material represent either different melodic levels or

ornamentation (for details see below). The basic character of the piece can therefore be interpreted as rather calm. The tempo may be fairly slow; the chromatic 16th-notes should be given time to unfold their full emotional content, and the 32nd-notes ought not to appear virtuoso.

The corresponding articulation is a continuous legato. This is only interrupted by phrasing and in the few cases of cadential octave leaps (L: mm. 16, 28, and 32). Phrasing is a matter that needs to be pondered with great care. At first glance one would think this to be straightforward, as one-measure motifs and the imitative texture are obvious. Closer analysis reveals that there is frequent overlap of a tied note's harmonically required resolution at the end of one motif with the initial note of the subsequent motif. Such overlap, in which an interruption of the sound flow would therefore be wrong, occurs in almost every measure. In all cases, the progression from the end of one phrase to the beginning of a new one can only be expressed by exceedingly eloquent dynamics and occasionally by a change of tone color. The following table gives an overview of the phrasing at the point after the downbeats in each measure. The caesura (˘) suggests a slight interruption of sound flow, the slur (ˆ) indicates that an interruption is unwarranted.

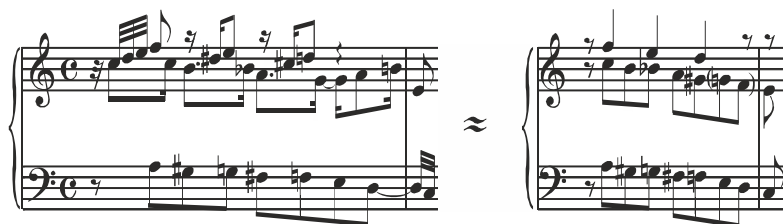
mm.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
U		ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ
L	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ
mm.	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
U	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ
L	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ	ˆ

In addition, there is a “breath” after the middle beats in U: mm. 10, 14, 15, 20, 23, and 24 as well as in L: mm. 3, 6, 7, 12, 19, and 27.

The prelude feature three ornaments, occurring in the final measures of the two halves respectively—the two measures that, through the use of scalar passages and leaping octaves, appear as virtuoso and thus distinctly different from the measures preceding them. In m. 16, the lower voice is embellished with what appears in the score as a mordent and a trill. The mordent, however, is followed by a suffix-like group and thus given away as another note-filling ornament. Both trills shake in 64th-notes, i.e., twice as fast as the fastest note values in the piece, the regularly occurring 32nd-notes. The one at m. 16₁ is approached stepwise and therefore begins on a slower main note and also ends in slower values, as indicated by Bach. The other trill begins and ends regularly, launched from the upper note and concluding with a suffix in the speed of the shakes. As both ornaments

occur in the left hand and against fast notes in the right hand, they intensify the virtuoso impression that is created in the written-out notes and further enhanced by the sudden appearance of the additional “middle voice.” The inverted mordent in m. 32, by contrast, is simple: it consists of the usual three notes (A-G#-A), which should be played fast enough for the trill to end before the B that initiates the run in the lower voice.

The prelude’s main motif (M1) is introduced in mm. 1-2₁. More precisely, the lower-voice part of the motif begins on the second eighth-note, after a downbeat note that (like the one in the upper voice of m. 17) serves as harmonic and metric support but does not belong to the thematic material. These downbeats should therefore be played in a neutral tone color and not at all assertively. The three lines of M1 are conceived in parallel motion, presenting a single gesture in what may be described as ornamented homophony:



The corresponding dynamic gesture is an overall diminuendo, triggered by a short but fairly strong crescendo in the initial four-note ascent. While the decrease in tension is gradual and straight in M1b, the leading M1a should be subtly shaded in such a way that the predominant chromatic descent stands out against the backdrop of a softer secondary line in the higher register.

M1 recurs without modifications in mm. 2, 4, 5, 11, 13, 25, and—with small variations—in mm. 8, 9, 26, 30, and 31. Inversions occur in mm. 17, 18, and 22, modified also in m. 21 and as a partial sequence in m. 20. Very free adaptations can even be detected in mm. 19 and 23-24. In all this, the dynamic shaping of the inversion raises a question. Should one retain the original design with its diminuendo or follow the natural temptation and ascend in crescendo? This determines whether the “B” section, which is where most of the inverted statements occur, emerges as the dramatic climax of a prelude in ternary form (which results if the rising lines are rendered in rising tension) or rather as an integrated section in a prelude in binary form (as happens if the original dynamic shaping is retained also for the motif’s inversion).

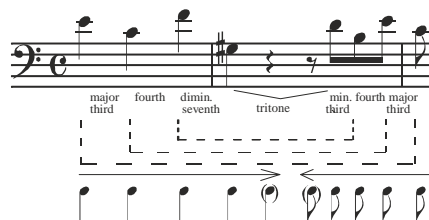
M2 is first presented in m. 3. It spans half a measure, beginning after the downbeat and ending on the middle beat or, in case of a tied note, on the note immediately after it (see m. 3, L: on D, U: on F). The motif bears a certain relationship to M1 owing to the combination of 16th-notes + 32nd-notes in the leading voice against eighth-notes in the accompanying voice and because of the hidden chromatic line with diatonic ending inside the leading voice. It differs from M1 in that the accompanying voice is diatonic and moves in contrary motion to the leading voice. The dynamic profile of M2 is therefore much more complex than that of M1. It begins in the leading voice with a written-out inverted mordent propelling a sudden major-sixth leap; this gesture is best expressed in an emphatic crescendo. The subsequent chromatic descent provides the corresponding relaxation, interrupted on an even softer level (no accent!) by the weak-beat escape note in the higher register. Against this highly emotional dynamic curve sounds the straight yet gentle crescendo of the eighth-note ascent in the accompanying voice. M2 is sequenced in the second half of the measure, with an adjustment at the beginning that is due to the resolution of the tied note. The motif further recurs unvaried in mm. 10 and 12 as well as varied and developed in mm. 27-30. The most interesting modification occurs in mm. 6-7 and 14-15, where the half-measure sequence gives way to half-measure imitation and the two voices swap some features.

With regard to an overall dynamic shaping, the large-scale developments are of foremost importance: see, e.g., the concave curve of the first three measures, built from one measure in predominant diminuendo, its continuation in imitation, and a resurfacing of tension in the rising sequence of the crescendoing M2 in m. 3, etc.

WTC II/20 in A minor – Fugue

This subject spans two measures, with a substantial rest in its middle. Beginning on the second beat of a measure in 4/4 time with the fifth degree of the A-minor scale, it concludes at m. 3₁ with the third degree. Rhythm and pitch suggest two palindromically related subphrases. With regard to rhythm, the subject's first half contains four quarter-notes followed by a quarter-note rest, while the second half viewed in reverse features four eighth-notes followed by an eighth-note rest. The pitch pattern shows an exclusive use of interval leaps (no single step within the subject!) in almost perfect mirror symmetry: the first and last leaps are major thirds, the second

and second-to-last intervals are perfect fourths, and while the third leap represents a diminished seventh, the third-to-last uses the complementing minor third. The bridged connection between the two halves of the phrase is marked by a gap both rhythmically—the duration of the rest is longer than any of the note values surrounding it—and in terms of pitch, with the interval that expresses the highest degree of tension: the tritone. Owing to this symmetrical correspondence of the two halves, the phrase must be regarded as an indivisible unit in which the rest, far from indicating phrasing, represents the moment of highest tension.



This view is supported by the harmonic progression, which displays a simple cadence. The dominant (in Bach’s harmonization often appearing in the form of a ninth chord) falls on m. 2₁ and resolves, through the rest and the leaping eighth-notes, only on the final note at m. 3₁. The dynamic design corresponding with these features consists of a powerful increase of tension toward the G#, followed by a tension-sustaining rest and a gradual release through the eighth-notes.



The subject appears eight times.

1	mm. 1-3	L	5	mm. 13-15	U
2	mm. 3-5	M	6	mm. 17-19	M
3	mm. 6-8	U	7	mm. 21-23	U
4	mm. 9 ₄ -11 ₃	L	8	mm. 25 ₄ -27 ₃	L



Apart from the adjustment of the initial interval in the tonal answer and the enlarged leap in the major-mode statement (see m. 10: A-B = a minor seventh instead of a diminished seventh), only small rhythmic modifications occur. In mm. 9, 17, and 25, the subject’s initial note is shortened to an eighth-note.¹ Inversions, strettos, or parallels are not used.

¹At first glance, the fourth and the final entries seem to leave it open whether we are dealing with the original of the subject beginning, with a third in which the gap is filled by a passing note, or with the answer entering an eighth-note late. Upon closer inspection one discovers that the metric organization of the melodic lines preceding the entries, together with the harmonic logic, determine the eighth-note on beat 4 as the end of the preceding development.

Bach invents two companions to the subject. These appear with great regularity, accompanying all but the initial and final entries. CS1 is launched after an intermittent partial sequence of the subject's tail from the sixth eighth-note of m. 3 onward. Its conspicuous feature is a five-note plunge occurring four times in descending sequences. The first two of these scale segments are separated by an interval leap and a rhythmic gap. This interruption is subsequently softened when the gaps in both pitch and rhythm are fleshed out. After a fourth plunge, an ornamented ascent concludes CS1 on a relaxed note. This counter-subject is thus independent from the subject in every possible respect. The dynamic equivalent to the compositional details consists in a four-fold increase of tension, with the climax falling each time on the lowest note, followed by a decrease in the gentle upward motion. CS2 enters almost a whole measure after the subject and ends undetermined (compare L: mm. 7-8 with M: m. 11, L: mm. 14-15, U: mm. 18-19, and M: mm. 22-23). Its most characteristic segment contains the first four eighth-notes. These complement the subject's rhythm by filling the mid-phrase rest in a way that ingeniously combines the three outstanding features from the subject: The interval pattern in the CS2 segment sounds like a free imitation of the subject's first half, the rhythm is an anticipation of the subject's second half, and the distinctive interval, used twice in the CS2 segment, is the tritone—the interval that connects the two palindromic halves of the subject. At the same time, the CS2 segment forms a parallel in sixths with the central portion of CS1. Rather than completely independent, CS2 is thus a supporting and enhancing complement to both the subject and its primary companion. Dynamically,

The musical score shows three staves: S (Subject) in the treble clef, CS1 (Counter-Subject 1) in the bass clef, and CS2 (Counter-Subject 2) in the bass clef. The Subject begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, and D5. CS1 enters with a series of eighth-note descents, including a five-note plunge. CS2 enters with a sequence of eighth notes. Dynamic markings include a crescendo over the Subject and CS1, and a diminuendo over CS2. A trill (tr) is marked on the final note of CS1.

a crescendo throughout the opening four eighth-notes is answered by a diminuendo that parallels the one in subject and CS1.

The fugue features eight subject-free passages. As the two counter-subjects enter later than the subject, overlaps of episode material with subject statements occur regularly. The table below lists only the episode segments that play a role in the interpretation of the fugue.

E1	m. 3	M: second to fifth eighth-notes
E2	mm. 5-6	M + L: up to the fifth eighth-note
E3	mm. 8-9	M: up to the first or fourth eighth-note in m. 10
E4	mm. 11 ₃ -13	U: up to m. 13 ₁ , L: up to the fifth eighth-note
E5	mm. 15-17 ₃	L: up to the fifth eighth-note
E6	mm. 19-21	M + L: up to the fifth eighth-note
E7	mm. 23-25 ₃	M: up to m. 26 ₁
E8	mm. 27 ₃ -28	

The episodes combine motifs derived from subject and counter-subject with independent motifs. Ms is a free sequence of the subject's second half. It is first introduced in m. 3, the minute link between the initial subject entry and the answer. It is later accompanied by a motif derived from the end of the counter-subject (for Mcs see L: mm. 11-12, M: m. 12, U: mm. 12-13), which soon spawns developments of its own (see mm. 11-13, all three voices) and ultimately even acquires an active attitude (see L: mm. 19-21₃).

M1 is the first independent motif. Neither its pitch nor its rhythm derives from the primary material. This motif is introduced in E2 (see L: m. 5₁-5₃). In its symmetrical design of ascent and descent, the number of notes (4 + 4), and the tension-sustaining rest, it shows a certain structural relationship to the subject.² M2 appears exclusively in E6 where it is heard in a pattern with imitation and varied sequence (see U/M: mm. 19-20).

The use of episode material establishes a number of relationships among the subject-free passages. (Subdivisions in some episodes appear on the basis of material, not as a result of harmonic closes.)

	material	compare mm.	with mm.
E1 ≈ E4b	Ms only	13 (L)	2 (L)
E2 ≈ E3a, E5a, E7b	Ms + M1	8-9 ₁ , 15-16 ₁ , 24-25 ₁	5-6 ₁
E3b ≈ E5b	M1a imit.	16-17	9-10
E4a ≈ E8	Ms + Mcs	27-28	11-13 ₁

As was already mentioned, E6 is in a category apart owing to its combination of M2 and the ascending sequences of Mcs. Outstanding for other reasons is E7, which consists of three segments. E7a is an extension of the preceding subject entry, E7b follows with a transposition of E2, and E7c rounds this episode off with scales that are not even abandoned at the advent of the subsequent subject entry, but replace the counter-subjects.

²Variants of the motif are the compact version without rest in E3 (see. M, O, M: mm. 9-10) as well as different extensions that increasingly approach the shape of simple runs.

Both the powerful tension created in subject and counter-subject and the large variety of rhythmic values used in the thematic material indicate a rather calm basic character. The tempo should be stately—slow enough to allow listeners to perceive the syncopations in CS1—but not dragging. The movement from one of the subject's quarter-note to the next must express dramatic tension of the highest order. Counting eighth-note beats, desirable as it may appear in light of the rhythmic complexity in the piece, is detrimental to the subject's character. The tempo proportion between the prelude and the fugue may be simple and direct, equaling a quarter-note in the prelude with a quarter-note in the fugue. (Approximate metronome settings: 60 for all beats in prelude and fugue.)

The articulation of this fugue constitutes an interesting case. While one generally expects all melodic notes in calm character to be played legato, the leaping pattern of the subject might cause some headache had Bach not given a very obvious hint. The hint was obvious at least to the performers of his time but may require some seemingly crooked thinking from us: If Bach assumed that performers of his time would interpret the subject as a pattern of consecutive leaps that must be detached, there would have been no need to write the wedges on the eighth-notes in mm. 2₃-3₂. He obviously trusted that musicians would be guided, by the high degree of tension expressed in this particular arrangement of intervals, to choose legato or at least hardly detached non legato. He marked the eighth-notes because he wished them to be energetically separated.

As a result of this train of thought, the subject's four quarter-notes are very long, just slightly detached, while all unmarked shorter notes values are legato. The eighth-note pattern in the subject's second half and, by extension, in Ms should be played non legato in a dramatic, not softly detached way. In CS2, the articulation of the eighth-notes is at the discretion of each interpreter, although it should be mentioned that playing them long not only emphasizes their relationship to the subject's beginning but also makes it easier for the listener to distinguish this second counter-subject among the numerous patterns of detached eighth-notes. (Performers who follow this suggestion would thus render the initial four eighth-notes of CS2 in an almost connected, hardly detached style while distinctly separating the remaining ones where the leaps no longer carry melodic importance.) Finally, where only one high-tension interval appears (as in U: m. 20) or where stepwise motion prevails in eighth-notes (as in M: m. 21), unbroken legato is recommended.

The fugue contains one kind of ornament only: the trill at the end of CS1 and, consequently, in Mcs. This trill begins on the upper neighboring

note. Its shakes are usually taken in 32nd-notes. This is acceptable, though choosing twice the speed might be preferable for anybody who can manage. The faster trills not only add drama and brilliance to the work, but also avoid the problem of fusing ornamental notes with melodically essential ones (e.g., the 32nd-notes in CS1, M1, and M2). The trill ends with the suffix in the rhythm notated by Bach.

There are two exceptions in the execution of the trill. In M: m. 27, the ornament begins on the main note and thus with a note of twofold duration before launching its shakes.³ In m. 28, a compound ornament beginning with an inverted mordent is indicated. The trill thus begins, in full speed, with the lower neighbor note.

As has been shown above, Bach's design of the episodes divides the fugue into two halves. The first half ends with a cadence in the home key at m. 13₁. The second of the slightly uneven halves literally consists of two sections: section II (mm. 13-21₁) features two subject statements in the upper and middle voices, followed by section III (mm. 21₂-28) with two statements in the upper and lower voices. The relationship among the subject entries in this fugue, particularly between U: mm. 13-15 and M: mm. 3-5 as well as L: mm. 25-27 and L: mm. 9-11, stresses the design in two halves over that in three sections. The second half is only slightly more extended, as a table of the corresponding episodes displays:

E1							E4b
	E2	E3			E5	(E6, E7a)	E7b (E7c)
			E4a				
							E8

The first section begins with a majestic increase from the first to the second subject statement. The episode that follows, conceived in descending sequences, reduces the level of tension, which is then picked up all the more forcefully by the third subject entry in the upper voice. E3 brings another gradual decrease. Interpreters who regard the redundant lower-voice statement as a "false fourth-voice entry"—a possible view—should aim at slightly surpassing the dynamic level of the previous entry. Performers who do not underwrite this concept should render the entry in slightly lesser intensity, as is fitting for a redundant statement. The final episode of section I, E4, provides the dynamic closure.

³Note that in Henle's *Urtext* edition, the counting of the measures is wrong at this spot since the half measure at the end of the second-last line and its complement at the beginning of the last line have accidentally been separated by a bar line and are consequently counted as two measures. The fugue totals 28 measures.

Section II begins with an upper-voice entry in the highest possible register. The relaxing episode that follows and the much less exposed middle-voice statement suggest a gradual decrease through this portion (mm. 13-19,). E6, the final episode of this section, just like that of the previous one, propels the tension upward rather than preparing a conclusion. Section III, thus closely linked to the preceding section, begins with a reiteration of the upper-voice statement in the highest octave available on eighteenth-century keyboards, thereby repeating if not surpassing the climax in m. 13. Once again, the subsequent episode together with the lower-voice entry, not least because of its reminiscence of features from the redundant entry from section I, present a decrease in tension that is, this time, completed with a final perfect cadence.

