

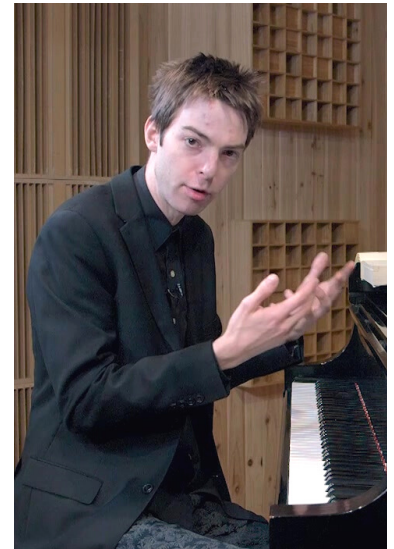
# BACH'S BWV 846

EVAN SHINNERS – INSTRUCTOR

WATCH THE LESSON  
AT [TONEBASE.CO](https://tonebase.co)

*"We can imagine this not so much as a prelude for our fingers, but a prelude for our ears."*

This Prelude and Fugue is universally known, and we have all likely heard it in movies and popular culture. However, Evan's goal is to portray the music as it would have been understood in 1722, the year Bach composed it. The idea of a composer writing to "express themselves" didn't exist in Bach's time. Instead, compositions had clear purposes. In this case, the Prelude sets up the Fugue, the weightier of the two pieces. The "Well-Tempered Clavier" was also the first significant collection of pieces in all major and minor keys. So this Prelude is also designed to prepare our ears.



*"Preludes and fugues through all the tones, and the semi-tones, those that have the major third and also those that have the minor third."*

*- J.S. Bach, Preamble to "The Well-Tempered Clavier"*

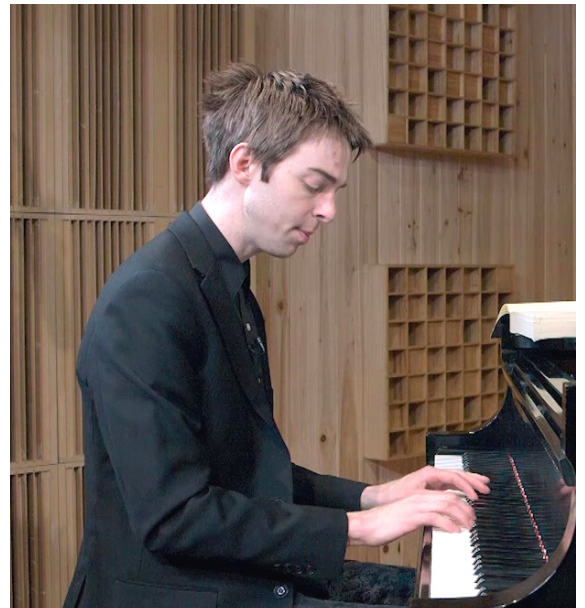


Don't play the opening to the Prelude any faster than you can hear the resonance of each chord – in Bach's day, a musician might use this Prelude to check the tuning their own instrument.

Pay attention to the dissonances and different kinds of harmony. Use this to inform your expression, but refrain from playing in a self-indulgent way. Pedal can be used, but there were no pedals on Bach's instruments, so also try it without.

Bach did not write any dynamic or tempo markings himself. Later editions added these as well as an extra measure to the Prelude (count your score and make sure you have 35 measures, not 36).

Sit very relaxed and straight at the piano. Take your time changing hand positions if necessary; it can add to the expression. Don't take too much *ritardando* at the end of the Prelude—Bach would've only slowed down a little bit.



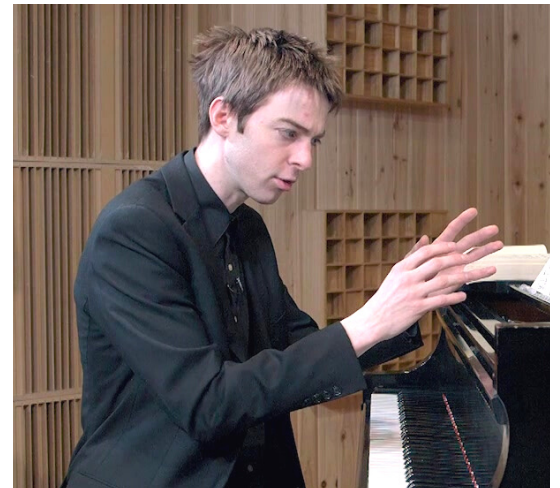
The expression throughout the Prelude and Fugue should stay very simple, since keyboard instruments of the time could not easily change dynamics. Use the fingering and hand position that is best for your own hand, and allows it to rotate effortlessly. Touching the piano should be as natural as possible.



The word "Fugue" comes from the Latin word "Fuga," which translates to "flight." In a Fugue, individual voices are "flying" around one another until they finally combine and cadence. This particular Fugue contains four voices.

The subject (theme) of this Fugue contains no chromatic tones at all. Fugues are an "exercise in intellect," and here Bach shows "the law" of strict imitation which all fugues follow. This initial voice is the alto, shortly afterward joined by the soprano. The tenor follows, and the bass joins last. Each voice enters with the same ascending motif, "the same law," but beginning on different notes in the scale. In a typical fugue, voice entrances would alternate between the root and the fifth. Bach breaks this law, however, by entering two voices in a row which start on the fifth scale degree (soprano and tenor). Use this fact to make the tenor's entrance more expressive.

In this first Fugue, Bach uses a device called stretto, or a "squeezing together" of the voices. Normally, the subject is presented in full. But in stretto, the voice isn't allowed to finish what it's saying before another voice enters. Bach places this stretto carefully. In mathematics, the Golden Ratio is the irrational ratio of any two consecutive numbers in the Fibonacci sequence; for the purposes of this Fugue, however, just know that this ratio is close to 0.618, equaling roughly 61.8% of the way through the piece. This corresponds to just over halfway through measure 16, where all four voices start entering in stretto (following another stretto just beforehand). This is an impressive and fascinating structural feat that should inspire your interpretation.



Most young students are taught to practice voices separately in a fugue. However, it's helpful to not overdo this. Evan suggests isolating each hand very slowly. He repeats one beat at a time until it's relaxed, musical, and comfortable. Try to come up with new fingerings if your hands ever get twisted or confused.

Bach revised this Fugue: originally the opening thirty-second notes were only sixteenth notes. The change to thirty-second notes propels the music forward. Evan gives that figure a bit of emphasis every time it appears. Toward the Golden Section of the piece, notice how the harmony becomes more adventurous and the strettos become much more frequent.

In Baroque practice of Bach's time, trills always start on the beat and with the upper note. Rather than bring out voices that do have the melody, try to soften the voices that do not have the melody. Work to balance each hand so the sound is the same when the melody must pass between hands.

## PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN C MAJOR | BWV 846

J. S. BACH  
(1685-1750)

## analysis

*"An exercise for the ears"*

## technique

*tempo: moderate, with no hurry, as if checking  
the tuning of the instrument**dynamics: not too dramatic, keeping in mind  
the narrow dynamic range of Bach-era  
keyboard instruments*

**Prelude**

major 3rd minor 3rd minor 3rd, yet major chord

major 3rd minor 3rd

C major D minor 7 G dom 7

*finger legato: connect notes with your fingers**use any fingering that helps you feel relaxed and produces an even sound**pedal can be used as well: let your ear guide you,**probably changing pedal either every bar or every two beats*

major 3rd, yet minor chord

C major A minor

*allow your hands to maintain their natural shape  
(the shape they have when hanging by your side)**rotate your hand evenly,  
almost like the spokes of a bicycle wheel*

with a bit of expression

*sit easily and relaxed; again, just listening to the tuning*

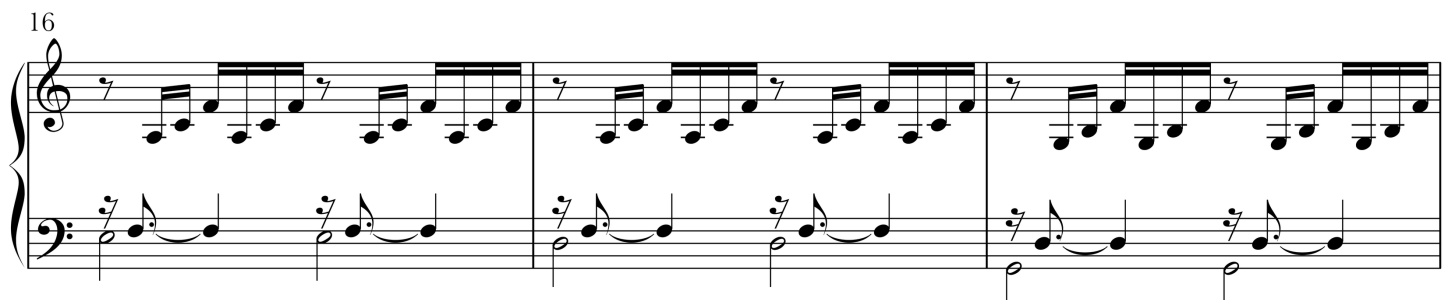
with a bit of expression



13



16



*feel free to take your time in getting to a chord if it doesn't fit your hand well -- position changes can be expressive*

19



*in your own score, make sure there isn't an additional measure here; some editions include a measure not written by Bach*

22



25

25

28

28

31

31

33

only a rather small ritardando

33

3

from Latin fuga, "flight"

"An exercise for the intellect", for the laws of fugue

### Fugue 1. a 4. "a 4" means 4 voices

**Soprano**

**Alto**

32nds propel the line forward

Subject enters starting on C (tonic)

Entrance on G (dominant)

similar theme in St. John Passion "Wir haben ein Gesetz" ("We have a law")

periodically revisit your choice of fingerings, making sure you find ones that make you feel free and at ease

**Tenor**

dominant

unexpected!

normally, 3rd and 4th entrances are on the tonic and dominant, not the reverse

**Bass**

tonic

voicing: to bring out the subject, instead of making the melody louder, try softening the others

**Soprano**

stretto

**Tenor**

stretto: subject entries occurring before the preceding voice finishes presenting the subject

practice each beat hands separately, musically, very slowly, then hands together (a useful strategy in all sections)

**Alto**

stretto

stretto (with less overlap)

**Tenor**

**Bass**

13 *start trill on C, and on the beat* *stretto, in close proximity* *Soprano*

*drop your wrist and weight into the trill, allowing a gentle release* *Tenor* *Bass*

*practice bringing out the voice entries (more exaggerated than you will eventually perform)*

16 *Soprano* *Alto* *stretto* *Tenor* *Bass*

*this impressive 4-part stretto appears precisely at the "Golden Ratio," 61.8% of the way to the end*

19 *Soprano* *Alto* *Tenor*

*Tenor*

*give special attention to voices that pass between hands, listening carefully to match the sound (m. 19 tenor entrance passes to right hand in beat 3)*

22 *Alto*

*the final subject entry is also the only one beginning on F (subdominant)*

25



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Prelude is written to prepare the ears, by listening to the resonance of each chord, while the Fugue is written to exemplify a set of laws.
- There is very little self-indulgence in this music: dynamics and ritardandi are both mild.
- Stay relaxed, and periodically look for fingerings that fit your hand better. To bring out one voice, try making the other voices softer.
- Keep the sound consistent when a voice passes between hands.
- Bach writes an important stretto, or overlapping entrance of the voices, in measure 16, at the "Golden Section" of the Fugue.



*American musician Evan Shinnars is an inspiration to young musicians and artists everywhere with his self-made career and uncompromising standards. Known for his unceasing devotion to the music of J.S. Bach, he has toured the world professionally delighting audiences with his stories, humor, original music, and Bach-playing.*