

PS Instructive Edition  
Worksheet & Practice Guide

# Prelude, BWV 939

Johann Sebastian Bach

## About the Prelude BWV 939: A Small Prelude that Sounds Big

This Prelude is one of 12 “small preludes” written separately at different times in Bach’s life for pedagogical purposes. An important feature of the piece is imitation - the left hand answers the right hand, using the same thematic material. Bring out this conversation between different voices, but take care to keep the music flowing where the hands swap roles.

Another thing to consider is that Bach didn’t compose this piece with a modern piano in mind. Do you know how the keyboard instruments of Bach’s time sounded? How will it influence your performance of this prelude if you imagine playing it on a clavichord or try to imitate the sound of an organ?

## Preparatory Questions and Exercises

1. Have a look at the first eight notes in the right hand, grouped together by a legato slur. This group of notes could be described as the seed from which the entire prelude grows. How many groups like this can you find (having the same number of notes and roughly the same melodic shape)?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. In which bar do both hands play this eight note motif at the same time? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Which chords are formed by the first three notes of the motifs in bar 1, 2 and 3? \_\_\_\_\_

4. There are two instances of so called ‘pedal point’ in this Prelude. This means that the harmonies change, while the underlying bass note remains the same. Which bars does this apply to?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Which bar is the only one that contains sixteenth-notes? \_\_\_\_\_

## Practice Plan

Session 1: Bars 1–4.

Session 2: Bars 8–11, right hand.

Session 3: Bars 8–11, adding the left hand.

Session 4: Bars 4–7.

Session 5: Bars 12–16.

## Mastering the Piece

1. Fluent eighth-notes in both hands throughout.

2. A smooth legato sound.

3. Independence of hands (dynamics and articulation), especially bars 4-7.

4. Clear and precise mordents, bars 8-11, left hand.

5. Maintaining a constant speed through the four final bars, 12-16.

**Session 1. Bars 1-4:**

Identifying the four-note chords which make up the first three bars of the right hand will aid fluency and help with understanding the phrasing.

Begin by studying the fingerings carefully; read them out loud, while trying them out silently on a table or the piano lid. Then play each exercise four times. Always play slowly enough to be in full control.

If your hand is too small to hold all four notes comfortably with your fingers, release the lowest note.

Then play the chord as written. Keep the wrist loose and allow it to move sideways.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

Now add the left hand pedal point and practice all four bars in a row. This is the most difficult exercise so far - remember to keep playing slowly!

8

**Session 2. Bars 8–11, right hand:**

Bars 8-11 uses the same eight-note motif in the right hand, but the key is now G major (dominant) instead of C (tonic). Exercises 9-17 repeat the same kind of work you have already done, but in the new key. Play each exercise four times.

9

10

11

12

13

14

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16

Now try the whole passage. Practice this at least four times. You need to feel really confident about playing this passage before going on to the next session.

17

**Session 3. Bars 8–11, adding the left hand:**

The pedal point in the left hand also returns in the G major passage, but now it is in the form of broken octaves, with an added mordent on the top G's. Try playing with both hands two bars at a time, without the mordents (♬). Practice this very slowly.

18

19

A mordent (♯) is played by alternating the main note with the one immediately below. Practice the mordents separately. Play with a light and soft hand, and make sure you relax the hand on the second and fourth beats.

20

Play the passage with the mordents, but without the low G's. Practice slowly, two bars at a time. Try to find a speed where you can avoid stops or bumps.

21

22

Now try the whole passage exactly as written. This is one of the most difficult passages - remember to practice really slowly!

23

**Session 4. Bars 4–7:**

Bars 4-7 has the eight-note motif in the left hand, accompanied by chords in the right hand. The left hand stretches a full octave here. Most hands can do this without too much effort, but don't keep the hand in a stretched position neither before or after the actual stretch. Let it contract and relax to keep the muscles supple. Play each exercise four times.

24  $\begin{matrix} 1 \\ 3 \\ 5 \end{matrix}$  5 1 4 3

25  $\begin{matrix} 1 \\ 3 \\ 5 \end{matrix}$  5 1 4 3

26  $\begin{matrix} 1 \\ 3 \\ 5 \end{matrix}$  5 1 3 2

27 5 3 1 3 5 1 4 3

28 5 3 1 3 5 1 4 3

29 5 3 1 3 1 1 3 2

Practice each chord change in the right hand, then play hands together two bars at a time.

30  $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$   $\begin{matrix} 4 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$

31  $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$   $\begin{matrix} 4 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$   
5 3 1 3 5 1 4 3

32  $\begin{matrix} 4 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$   $\begin{matrix} 4 \\ 2 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$

33  $\begin{matrix} 4 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$   $\begin{matrix} 4 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$   $\begin{matrix} 4 \\ 2 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$  1 2 4 2  
5 3 1 3 5 1 4 3

34  $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ 2 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$  3  $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$

35  $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ 2 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$  3  $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ 3 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$   
2 1 5 3 1 3 5 1 3 2

Then play the whole passage slowly with both hands.

36

5 5 4 4 4 1 2 4 2 5 3 5

5 3 1 3 5 1 4 3 5 3 1 3 5 1 4 3 2 1 5 3 1 3 5 1 3 2

**Session 5. Bars 12–16:**

This is where Bach introduces a lot of new features, which makes for a varied, fun and challenging practice session! To begin with, practice the eighth-note motifs like you have done in previous sessions. As always, play each exercise four times.

37

1 3 5 1 2 1

38

1 5 3 1 3 5 1 2 1

39

5 2 1 2 3

1 5 3 1 3 5 1 2 1

What's new in bar 13 is that the eight-note motif is played by both hands simultaneously.

40

1 3 5 1 3 2

41

5 2 1 1 4 2 3

1 3 5 1 3 2

42

1 2 5 2 1 4 2 3

5 3 1 3 5 1 3 2

Then, in bar 14, Bach surprises us with lots of sixteenth-notes.

43

3 2 1 3 2 1 3 2 3

44

3 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 5

45

3 2 1 3 2 1 3 2 3 1 2 3 4 5

The piece ends like a three-voice chorale. When you practice, play in strict time. Later on, you may want to make a slight *ritardando* and/or delay the last chord a little.

46

47

48

Now you are ready to try the whole section slowly with both hands. Keep the sixteenth-notes in mind when you start and choose a tempo that you will be able to keep up until the end.

49

2

4 3 5 1 5

# PRELUDE 1

BWV 939  
from Six Small Preludes

Johann Sebastian Bach  
*Piano Street Instructive Edition*

*mf* Keep the wrist loose and allow it to move sideways. Strive for fluency and forward motion through all eighth-note passages.

Play the right hand softer than the left, and make quarter note upbeats short and light.

*mf*

Use the weight of the arm to create a warm, round and resonant sound that lasts for three bars.

Holding this chord over the barline creates a beautiful suspension.

*p*

If the mordents of the left hand causes bumps and stops, try practicing without them.

*crescendo*

Lifting the hand after the low G's will make it easier to find a good position for playing the mordents.

*f*

Keep tempo!

Make a slight ritardando and/or delay the last chord a little.



# PRELUDE 1

BWV 939  
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Musical notation for measures 1-4. The piece is in C major, 7/8 time. The right hand features a melodic line with fingerings 1-2-3, 5-3, 4-1-2-4, 5-3, 4-1-2-3, and 5-3. The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment with fingerings 5, 3, 1, 1, 4. Dynamics include *mf* and *p*.

Musical notation for measures 5-8. The right hand continues the melodic line with fingerings 4, 4, 5, 3, 5, 1-2-3, 5-3. The left hand accompaniment has fingerings 3, 1, 4, 3, 1, 5, 3, 1, 1, 3, 2, 4. Dynamics include *p*.

Musical notation for measures 9-12. The right hand features a melodic line with fingerings 4-1-2-3, 5-3, 4-1-2-4, 5-3, 4-1-2-4, 5, 2. The left hand accompaniment has fingerings 121, 5, 3, 1, 1, 2. A *crescendo* marking is present over measures 9-11, and a *f* dynamic is used in measure 12.

Musical notation for measures 13-16. The right hand features a melodic line with fingerings 3, 1, 2, 5, 4, 2, 3, 1, 3, 1, 3, 1, 1, 5, 2, 4, 1. The left hand accompaniment has fingerings 1, 5, 3, 1, 1, 3, 2, 4, 3, 5, 1, 5, 5. The piece concludes with a final cadence.

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