

Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: Pedagogical Approaches and the Different Styles of Preludes

***O Cravo Bem Temperado* de Bach: abordagens pedagógicas e os diferentes estilos de prelúdios**

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Abstract: The present article discusses pedagogical aspects aiming to contribute to teaching and learning Bach's *Preludes* of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Section one presents a review of the prelude as a musical genre and the different styles that influenced the *Well-Tempered Clavier Preludes*. Then, there is an analysis of selected preludes that will exemplify the variety of styles found in this work of Bach.

Keywords: *The Well-Tempered Clavier*; prelude styles; pedagogical approaches in the music of J.S. Bach.

Resumo: O presente artigo discute aspectos pedagógicos que contribuem com o ensino e a aprendizagem dos *Prelúdios* de *O Cravo Bem Temperado* de Johann Sebastian Bach. Primeiramente é feita uma revisão do prelúdio como gênero musical e dos estilos que influenciaram os *Prelúdios* de *O Cravo Bem Temperado*. Em seguida, é feita uma análise de prelúdios selecionados que virão exemplificar a variedade de estilos presentes nessa obra de Bach.

Palavras-chave: *O Cravo Bem Temperado*; estilos de prelúdios; abordagem pedagógica na música de J.S. Bach.

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1 – Introduction

This research proposes a discussion of pedagogical aspects that could benefit students working on Johann Sebastian Bach's *Preludes* of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. These *Preludes* encompass a wide range of styles, being important pedagogical tools when used appropriately. They offer opportunities for refining basic skills such as phrasing clearly, voicing, choosing articulation, tempo and the different affects found in the Baroque Era. These works can also be used to help students develop an important skill which is decision making. The fact that there are few indications in the score, if any at all, creates the need to make decisions on their own.

The present research cannot encompass all the styles available for discussion in these works. Both preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* were based on popular genres of the time such as trio-sonatas, concertos, lute pieces, inventions, *ariosos*, dances and French overtures. Once students are familiar with the type of music that was influential in a prelude, there are many more chances to achieve a successful and convincing interpretation of Bach's preludes.

2 – The Prelude

A prelude is a piece of music that precedes "something else", a fugue, for instance, or it could be the opening or the introduction of a suite. It normally has the function of preparing the listeners' ears for a certain affect through the composer's choice of key and time signature. According to LEDBETTER (2014), early instrumental preludes developed from improvisation working as mean of checking the tuning and the tone quality of the instrument – the lute, for instance – and would also be a warm up for the player. The need for notating these improvisations came to provide models for students but the free style remained characteristic of this genre.

These were fundamental features of preludes up to the sixteenth century. Later on they became a more organized form. At the time, a prelude or “*praeludium*” was more often called *intonazione* (tuning), *intrada* (entrance), *ricercare* (to search) or even *toccata* (to play). Preludes from the early sixteenth century could look just like a fantasia or could be semi-measured. Some types of preludes, trying to keep its characteristic “free style” could have no measures at all, being called unmeasured preludes. MORONEY (2014) states that Louis Couperin, Jean Henry D’Anglebert, Nicolas Lebègue, Gaspard de Le Roux and Jean Phillip Rameau are some of the most significant composers of unmeasured preludes for harpsichord.

According to LEDBETER (2014), the prelude reached its pinnacle with Bach who developed it in both compositional quality and range of styles, manners and form. The *Well-Tempered Clavier* is a great example of how much variety is possible to achieve in this genre. The two sets of 24 preludes and fugues – Book 1 dating from 1722 and Book 2 from 1742 – had pedagogical objectives. Bach used these preludes to demonstrate techniques, fingering and composition, exploring the title “prelude” since it was used so freely. He was also exploring the entire range of major and minor keys only possible due to the recently created system of temperament – as we use on keyboard instruments today. Prior to the “new” system, pieces could only be played in certain keys. Other composers exploited this new tuning system and created collections of preludes; John Wilson with his collection of lute preludes, written in the 1640s, and J.C.F Fisher with his preludes and fugues for organ are some examples. Bach, however, was the most systematic composer to exploit this new tonal system, being the first one to write in all 24 major and minor keys.

3 – Influence of dance

Bach was heavily influenced by dances since French culture was a strong presence in most places where he lived and worked. Learning French language, music and dance was part of formal education at the time for high born Germans. As a teenager he visited the city of Celle

– a miniature Versailles – many times probably encountering French plays, dance and music performed by excellent French artists (LITTLE and JENNE, 2001, p.3-4).

Familiarity with the French manners was very important especially for someone like Bach, who had been introduced to court and participated in its activities many times. According to LITTLE and JENNE (2001, p.7), a very specific behavior was expected in such moment and German courts would hire French dancing masters to help courtiers on the pathway to elegance:

In addition to teaching dancing they instructed courtiers in deportment, such as the proper way to bow to a superior or an inferior, how to do honors in passing, what to do when introduced at court, what to do with one's hat and sword, and so on. There were precise rules which, when followed, resulted in elegance and the appearance of gentility, the height of civilized behavior.

French social dance was not only part of court activities but also present at formal balls and important events of the middle-class and aristocrats. Student dramas in Leipzig also incorporated this style. Places that were bigger cultural and artistic centers could support events that demanded bigger productions such as the ballet and opera. Celle, Berlin and Dresden were some of those places able to maintain a full orchestra of French players for an entire season and Bach undoubtedly saw French dances when he attended operas in those places – French dances or a ballet scene would be typically performed during the interludes between acts.

Little and Jenne also say that Bach knew personally or knew the work of three famous French dancing masters in Saxony. Johannes Pasch, Pantaleon Hebenstreit, Jean-Baptiste Volumier were dance masters and the latter two, Bach's good friends, were also musicians, performing at court and composing dance music (LITTLE and JENNE, 2001, p.14-15). It is interesting to note how music and dance were both part of these composers' training and how intrinsically connected the two realms were, to the point that one person alone could teach dance, write music for it and still play this music on an instrument. Bach was certainly very familiar with

French dance and music and, more than that, these were not only important elements in his music—they were also part of his world.

4 – Other styles

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* encompasses a huge variety of styles ranging from the *stile antico*, based on white-key Renaissance motets, to the most modern French court styles. When studying a particular piece from these sets, it is very important to know what type of music we are working with in order to give it the right character, tempo, articulation and style.

According to WATERMAN and ANTHONY (2014), the French overture found in some of the preludes comes from the Lully's ballet overtures originated in the 1650s. This style quickly became a pattern also in French opera and ballet overtures. German composers incorporated the style that was also used in openings of suites. This form comprises of a slow, majestic opening, marked by dotted rhythms and suspensions, with a lively fugal second section. The toccata style often found in this works was originally a piece that displays manual dexterity, always for solo keyboard instrument. In the Baroque, these pieces became large scale works in free form normally including one or two fugues (CALDWELL, 2014).

5 – Selected Preludes

Regardless the fact that Bach only wrote few sets of dance suites for the keyboard – the six *French Suites*, six *English Suites*, the six *Partitas* and the *French Overtures* – other works were heavily influenced by dance styles even when not given dance titles. Some of the *Preludes* of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* based on dances are the *F minor, Book 2* (gavotte-like) and the *C# minor, Book 1* (loure-like).

The *Prelude in Eb major* from Book 1 is sarabande-like. According to TROEGER (2003, p.64), dotted rhythmic figures, varied harmonic rhythms and full texture are elements characteristic of the sarabande. Often, there are streams of notes coming out of a chord

evoking a lute accompaniment. In a typical sarabande, the accentuation often happens on the second beat but can also happen on the first. In this case, the emphasis on the first beat is given through ornamentation in measure 4, arpeggiation in measures 5-7 and a combination of both in measure 8.



Figure 1: *Prelude in Eb minor, WTC I, mm. 1-8.* This prelude presents characteristics of a sarabande.

The 3/2 time signature implies a slower tempo than the ones with smaller values (2/4, 3/4 and 6/8). It is important to mention that the dotted quarter notes could be played as double dotted notes, giving a more dramatic character to the piece, which would be very appropriate here. Besides the performance practice approach to double dots and the importance of the dance element to this piece, this prelude would be also a helpful tool for students who need to improve on listening and matching the sound, especially in this case. Here, the long notes require careful listening through the sound as it decays, in order to match the sound of the following notes.

A good preparatory piece for this prelude would be the *Sarabande in G minor* from the *English Suite No. 3* – the concept of a sarabande can be more easily understood in this context. This specific sarabande is a shorter piece and its time signature (3/4), as we can see in figure

2, is more commonly found in less advanced pieces; therefore, students are more familiar with this notation than with the one in the prelude (3/2 meter). Besides, this sarabande has the same type of chordal texture of the *Prelude in Eb minor*, which would also help to clarify the concept of the dance. In this case, emphasis on beats are achieved through longer note values on the second beat of most measures as well as ornamentation – trills and arpeggios.



Figure 2: *Sarabande in G minor, English Suite No. 3*, mm. 1-12. Suggested preparatory piece for the *Prelude in Eb minor, WTC I*.

Similar to the previous prelude is the one in *E minor* from Book 1. As we can see in figure 3, this one is more vocal, in 4/4 meter which implies a more moderate tempo, being like an aria where a singer would be accompanied by the *viola da gamba*. A great way to practice this prelude, after learning hands separate, would be to play the left hand part with only the chords in the right hand (beats one and three).

BWV 855

Figure 3: *Prelude in E minor, WTC I*, mm. 1-4. Presents characteristics of an aria.

The *Prelude in C# major, Book 1*, is like a gigue. It requires great independence in both hands since its material exchange between hands. Fast and light, there are no chordal passages in this piece, but a continuous stream of sixteenth notes. This particular one fits into the category of giga II described by LITTLE and JENNE (2001, p.168) as a piece typical of the instrumental style with joyful affect, long phrases, imitative texture and lack of cadences.

BWV 848

Figure 4: *Prelude in C# major, WTC I*, mm. 1-15. This prelude is giga II-like.

Rotation is essential in this prelude and exercises could be done by isolating measures 3-5 and 10-13 to work with hands separate on rotation in intervals of fourths, fifths, and sixths; these intervals are found throughout this entire prelude in both hands. The first measure of each phrase (mm. 7 and 9) requires rotation in a wider interval – the augmented sixth. Blocking these measures and then using rotation to play the notes as written will help the student to achieve a comfortable and secure approach to these passages. In addition, blocking the hand with the easier part (left hand in mm. 1-7 and right hand in mm. 9-15) and playing it along with the other hand can give more awareness of intervals and more security, especially in such an unusual and sometimes uncomfortable key.

Another gigue is the *Prelude in A major, Book 2*. This one fits in the category of giga I, with consistent triple groupings throughout the piece and imitative counterpoint as texture. The 12/8 time signature and the key of F major suggests a moderate tempo and an atmosphere (affect) of constancy and generosity (SCHUBART, 1806).

The image shows a musical score for 'Prelude in A major, WCT II, mm. 1-6' by Schubart, BWV 838. The score is in 12/8 time and A major. It features a three-voice texture with consistent triple groupings and imitative counterpoint. The right hand has a melodic line with triplets and slurs, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets and rests. Fingerings are indicated throughout the piece.

Figure 5: *Prelude in A major, WCT II*, mm. 1-6. This prelude is giga I-like.

This prelude is a great piece to work on contrapuntal textures. Despite its three voices, it is not very complex since the counterpoint is imitative, not presenting many different subjects as in a typical Bach fugue. Furthermore, its slower tempo makes it easier for the student to

hear through the different voices. Practicing each voice separately is a good strategy for shaping the phrases and especially listening to the sound as it continues through after long note values.

The famous *Prelude No. 1 in C major, Book 1*, is a good example of a free, improvisatory style, a literal “prelude.” This piece relates to the origin of the early prelude, working as a piece or “something” that you play to warm up your fingers, try out the instrument, its tone quality, and tuning.



Figure 6: *Prelude in C major, WTC I, mm.1-5*. This prelude presents a free and improvisatory style.

The arpeggiated chords in figure 6 all fit comfortably in the hand and the same type of articulation (legato) is kept throughout the whole piece. It would be a very good piece for beginner or early intermediate students to improve their touch and sound by practicing legato and evenness. Wrist flexibility and rotation should also be addressed to help with the smoothness of legato along with alignment of the forearm and fingers to improve tone quality.

Another important aspect that would be very useful when working with intermediate students is the choice of dynamics. Because there are no dynamic marks in this piece (and, overall, in any of J. S. Bach’s works), the student could be challenged to choose how to shape

phrases based on the harmony. When working on phrasing, students can practice blocking the chords to develop a more clear sense of the chord progression. The teacher can help by asking questions such as “where do you feel tension?,” “where do you feel the music relaxes?,” or “where do you think we get home?” Listening and feeling the moments of tension and relaxation in the music is a more accessible approach for students who are not very advanced or do not have a strong theory background and will still help them to make more appropriate and conscious choices.

The *Prelude in C major* from Book 2 is also written in the same free-improvisatory style, almost like an unmeasured prelude. The rhythms Bach writes right in the opening, measures 1-5 of figure 7, not repeated in patterns, suggest an attempt to notate, with measures, a free and improvisatory piece of music. This prelude is much more complex than the C major from Book 1, with contrapuntal writing that needs to be carefully addressed and practiced with each hand separately and with a clear idea of where the many overlapping phrases begin and end.



Figure 7: *Prelude in C major, WTC II*, mm. 1-5. It presents free contrapuntal style.

The *Prelude in Bb major, Book 1*, is toccata-like. This is a bold, virtuoso piece with brilliant passage-works/runs in long, continuous lines with sixteenth notes. It is a great piece for working on evenness. Practicing hands separate in this case is not ideal since the continuous

line is split between hands, and practicing each hand alone could create unwanted accents. Each group of four thirty-second notes, as in measures 1 through the second beat of measure 3 (see figure 8a), should be blocked in a way to help the student understand the harmony, seeing groups of notes instead of each note individually. After becoming comfortable with grouping, and more familiar with the notes, the student should be able to make decisions on how to shape this piece.



Figure 8a: *Prelude in Bb major, WTC I*, mm. 1-3. This prelude is toccata-like.

Since there are no indications in the score, the student needs to choose dynamics and whether or not to take some time in specific places based on the harmony and structural points of the piece. The short cadenza-like passages found throughout the second page, demonstrated in measures 11-15 of figure 8b, of this prelude are good exercises for learning the concept of “cadenza”. Working on shaping cadenzas in short passages like this can be a very useful tool in preparation to playing longer concerti cadenzas.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the Prelude in Bb major, WTC I, measures 10, 12, and 14. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. Measure 10 (top system) features a treble staff with eighth-note patterns and a bass staff with a similar pattern, including fingerings (1, 2, 3, 2, 1) and a circled measure number '10'. Measure 12 (middle system) shows a treble staff with a descending eighth-note scale and a bass staff with a similar pattern, including fingerings (4, 3, 3, 3, 4, 3) and a circled measure number '12'. Measure 14 (bottom system) features a treble staff with a descending eighth-note scale and a bass staff with a similar pattern, including fingerings (1, 3, 1, 1) and a circled measure number '14'. The page number '103' is located in the top right corner.

Figure 8b: Cadenza-like passages in the *Prelude in Bb major, WTC I*, mm. 10-15. This piece is recommended in preparation for concerti cadenzas.

The *Prelude in C minor* from Book 2 is an example of two-part invention. Hands separate practice is ideal since hands will be trading roles between having the melody and providing accompaniment. Rotation exercises in thirds would be helpful to apply in each hand separately. Since each beat of the first two measures is composed of chords with a neighbor tone, one should play only the real notes of the chord when applying rotation. Also important is to work on the rotation and alignment or “arm supporting the fingers,” isolating the two-beat pattern – as in measures 3-4.



Figure 9: *Prelude in C minor, WTC II, mm. 1-4.* This prelude presents characteristics of a two-part invention.

It would be good for the student to be familiar with some of the two-part inventions. *Invention No. 4 in D minor* would be a great preparation for this prelude since it involves the same type of rotation between wider intervals and the exchange of material between hands in a shorter piece, as demonstrated in figure 10.



Figure 10: *Two-part invention No. 4 in D minor, mm. 1-15.* Suggested piece as preparation for the *Prelude in C minor, WTC II*.

According to the great pianist and interpreter of Bach, Angela HEWITT (2002), the *Prelude in B major* from Book 2 sounds like a concerto. Its brilliant opening in the first two measures suggests a *tutti* followed by the soloist in measure 3. Later in the piece, measures 12-15 for instance (see figure 11b), it seems there are two soloists alternating with the tutti, perhaps a violin and a flute. This prelude has different sections, some sounding like little *cadenzas* in the middle of the concerto, others sounding like solos or tutti. The student should definitely take advantage of this aspect to create different colors and contrast within the piece.

The image shows the first seven measures of the Prelude in B major, BWV 892. The score is written for piano in treble and bass clefs. The key signature is B major (two sharps). The music begins with a forte dynamic in the first two measures, followed by a change in texture in the third measure. The score includes various fingering and articulation markings, such as slurs and accents, to guide the performer. The piece is labeled 'BWV 892' in the top right corner.

Figure 11a: *Prelude in B major, WTC II*, mm. 1-7. Concerto-like prelude. Its opening measures suggest a tutti (mm. 1-2) and a soloist (mm. 3-7).



Figure 11b: *Prelude in B major, WTC II*, mm. 11-15. This specific passage shows a texture that could represent two soloists (in the upper voices).

Finding the different sections will enable the student to identify main differences in textures and patterns. Since this piece was written with many sequences, it is very important to find its main patterns. For instance, measures 3 is a model for measures 3-7 (see figure 11a) thus, practicing each measure and stopping on the downbeat of the next one is a good strategy. The cadenza-like passages (mm. 17-23) should be practiced with both hands as if they were being played by only one instrument. This is a very challenging prelude for its virtuoso character and constant flow of sixteenth notes in at least one of the hands, with the eventual addition of a third voice in measure 12.

Another style often found in Bach's preludes from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* is the French Overture Style. Examples of this style are the *Prelude in D major* from Book 2 and the *Prelude in G minor*, also from Book 2. According to SCHUBART (1806), the key of D major is a key of joy, triumph and rejoice which enhances the French overture character. In the case of the *Prelude in G minor* – key of discontentment, resentment and dislike – the double dots should definitely be applied since it increases the drama. A careful study of the voices separately is necessary since they float in between hands, as we can see in figure 12, being very important to know where exactly a certain voice ends or begins.



Figure 12: *Prelude in G minor, WTC II, mm. 1-4.* This prelude presents characteristics of the French overture style, characterized by the practice of double dots.

6 – Conclusion

The *Preludes* of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* are pieces that present a great variety of styles. It is undeniably important to be familiar with these different styles before approaching the *Preludes* so that one can achieve a well-informed interpretation. Bach's *Little Preludes*, the *French* and (sometimes) *English Suites*, and also the two and three part inventions offer the variety of styles that we need in order to play these *Preludes* with spontaneity, character and style.

A student does not need to have played an entire *French suite* in order to understand a *Prelude* from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Learning some of the dances or a specific one that relates to the style of the assigned *Prelude* can be a helpful and clarifying way to introduce the concept of style to a student. Often, the dance movements from the suites, or the two/three-part inventions, are shorter pieces of music and technically less demanding, making them a good preparation to these *Preludes*.

In addition to teaching students about the many styles of Bach, these *Preludes* are fascinating pieces of music, effective repertoire and performance material. After working on these *Preludes*, the student will have a better understanding of Bach's language and will be able to make more conscious artistic decisions.

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