

# The Keyboard Prelude: a 300 year evolution with 24 examples

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piano and harpsichord

## **Baroque:**

Prelude in a minor (1706)	Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)
Prelude in e minor from "The Art of Harpsichord Playing" (1716)	Francois Couperin (1668-1733)
Prelude from Suite in C major (1687?)	Henry Purcell (1659-1695)
Prelude from Suite in d minor HWV 428 (1720)	G. F. Handel (1685-1759)
Preludes in C major and c minor from "The Well-Tempered Clavier", Vol. 1 (1722)	J. S. Bach (1685-1750)

## **Classical:**

Solfeggietto (1770)	C. P. E. Bach (1714-1788)
Prelude Op. 39, no. 2 (1789)	L. van Beethoven (1770-1827)

## **Early Romantic:**

Prelude Op. 16, no. 2 in B-flat Major (1845)	Clara Schumann (1819-1896)
Prelude Op. 35, no. 4 in A-flat Major (1837)	Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
Preludes in D-flat Major and b-flat minor from Preludes, Op. 28 (1839)	F. Chopin (1810-1849)

Intermission

**Late Romantic:**

Prelude in f# minor from 25 Preludes, Op. 64 (1904) Cesar Cui (1835-1918)

Preludes in C major, B-flat major and b minor,  
Op. 11 (1888-1895) Alexander Scriabin  
(1872-1915)

Preludes in G major and b minor,  
Op. 32 (1910) Sergei Rachmaninoff  
(1873-1943)

**20th Century/Modern:**

Preludes "The Dance of Puck" and  
"The Sunken Cathedral" from Bk. 1 (1910) Claude Debussy  
(1862-1918)

Prelude no. 2 from Three Preludes (1926) George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Prelude no. 1 in the form of Blues (1929) Bohuslav Martinu (1890-1959)

Preludes in b-flat minor and A-flat Major from  
24 Jazz Preludes, Op. 53 (1988) Nikolai Kapustin  
(1937- )

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# Introduction to the Keyboard Prelude

What is a Prelude?

Let's start with Webster's definition: *a preliminary to an action, event condition, or work of broader scope and higher importance.*

This is how it started in music, as well. The lute was a forerunner of the guitar and was popular from the Middle Ages to the 18th century. The lutenist would first improvise something to test the tuning, touch, or tone of the instrument and this was called a Prelude. Also, a church organist would play a "Chorale Prelude" to establish the pitch before the singing of a church hymn.

The first written harpsichord Preludes appeared in the mid-17th century and were improvisatory, just the notes written without indications of rhythm or meter. In the later Baroque, they appeared as the introduction to a dance suite or a fugue. So the Prelude started out as an improvisatory warm-up piece and as an introduction for the music to come. It then evolved as you will hear.

Of course, one cannot hope to have an exhaustive Prelude study in one concert but a couple hundred have been surveyed in choosing the 24 for this concert. They are grouped mostly in chronological order under the general classification of the era to show how the genre evolved over a 300 year period. Some of the most important composers who wrote at least 24 are represented with two contrasting examples.

There are also Preludes written for operas, as well as stand-alone orchestral Preludes. This concert will just be concerned with those written for the harpsichord or piano. While the piano was not in use until the mid-18th century, the harpsichord pre-dates the piano by over 300 years. Being able to hear the earliest Preludes on the instrument for which they were written gives added insight into the Prelude's evolution. We hope you will enjoy this varied and broad ranging selection.

## Notes on the Composers

**Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)** was a great French Baroque composer, organist, and music theorist. His father was the organist for many churches in Dijon, where Jean-Philippe was born. He started out on the harpsichord as a youngster and eventually became known as France's leading organist. Only in his late 40's did he decide to start writing operas. His masterpiece is "Castor et Pollux" from 1737. His works have been given the highest praise. However, his librettos unfortunately did not have the quality of the music. He published three volumes of harpsichord music of which the Prelude in a-minor is the first piece.

**Francois Couperin (1668-1733)** was the most illustrious of a famous French family of musicians. His uncle, **Louis Couperin**, was the first composer to publish preludes for the harpsichord in 1653. **Louis** also started an unbroken dynasty of Couperins serving as organist at the church of Saint-Gervais in Paris from 1653 to 1826. Quite a record! **Francois** was given the title "Le Grand" because of his extraordinary keyboard and compositional abilities. He published four volumes of harpsichord music, as well as "The Art of Harpsichord Playing". He gave detailed descriptions for the playing of ornaments which are an integral part of harpsichord playing. His music was admired by Bach, and later Brahms and Ravel.

**Henry Purcell (1659-1695)** was one of England's greatest composers and is best known for his vocal and orchestral works. His opera, "Dido and Aeneas" is still performed. During his short life he wrote much incidental music for the stage as well as sacred works and songs, instrumental works, and many harpsichord pieces, including 8 suites. He was the organist of Westminster Abbey and is buried there. His burial tablet states "Here lyes Henry Purcell, Esq.; who left this life, and is gone to that blessed place where only his harmony can be exceeded."

**Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759)** was born the same year as Bach and only about 80 miles away in Germany, but they never met. Handel found his livelihood in London where he spent the last 50 years of his life and became a British subject in 1727. After writing 42 operas without much success, he turned to writing oratorios where he remains immortalized. He also wrote 16 harpsichord suites, many beginning with preludes. In contrasting Handel and Bach, Nicholas Slonimsky wrote, "Music-lovers did not have to study Handel's style to discover its beauty, while the sublime art of Bach could be fully understood only after knowledgeable penetration into the contrapuntal and fugal complexities of its structure."

In 1722 **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)** finished Book 1 of his monumental work that many pianists have referred to as "The Old Testament". He titled it as follows: *"The Well-Tempered Clavier" or Preludes and Fugues through all the tones and semi-tones, in regard to both the major third and the minor third. For the benefit and use of the musical youth wishing to learn and for the entertainment of those already skilled in this study. Devised and composed by J.S. Bach, Capellmeister to his serene highness the*

*Prince of Anhalt-Cothen, and Director of his Chamber Music.* With this long but humble title, Bach created a work that Beethoven and nearly every other serious keyboard student has studied and continues to admire.

**Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788)** was the second surviving son of J.S. Bach. He spent the first 30 years of his career in Berlin at the service of Frederick the Great (1738-68) and then in Hamburg taking the job of his godfather, G.P. Telemann, as Director of Music for 5 churches there (1768-88), until his death. Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven admired him and Mozart said of him, "Bach is the father and we are the children". He was extremely prolific, composing symphonies, concertos, choral and religious works, chamber works and nearly 200! keyboard sonatas. It is ironic that someone whose works were held in such high regard then, has today the little "Solfeggietto" as one of his most popular pieces.

**Beethoven (1770-1827)** wrote his only two preludes as a teenager and they were published much later. They are among his least known music. However, even the least of what Beethoven wrote is of some interest.

**Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896)** was given a broad musical education by her father and started composing at a young age. She performed her own piano concerto at 16 with Mendelssohn conducting. After the age of 36 as life's responsibilities intervened, she composed very little. In 1840 she married Robert Schumann, had 8 children and maintained a very successful concert career. She was one of the first pianists to perform from memory and, of course, promoted the works of her husband as well as Johannes Brahms, with whom she developed a lifelong friendship. She played for sell-out crowds and laudatory critical reviews. Edvard Grieg said she was "one of the most soulful and famous pianists of the day". She has been recognized more as a great pianist than composer. However, today her compositions are being performed and recorded more often.

**Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)** was one of the greatest child prodigies in history. Goethe compared the child Mendelssohn with his hearing of the child Mozart: "What this little man can do in extemporizing and playing at sight borders the miraculous... what [he] accomplishes, bears the same relation to Mozart that the cultivated talk of a grown-up person bears to the prattle of a child." Mendelssohn's conservative temperament was more about infusing the classical forms with the current style than with creating new forms and styles. His love of Bach drove him in 1829 to arrange and conduct a performance of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" in Berlin. The success of this performance, one of the very few since Bach's death, was the central event in the revival of Bach's music in Germany and throughout Europe. Mendelssohn said of this: "To think that it took a Jew's son to revive the greatest Christian music for the world!"

The preludes of **Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)** are a watershed event for the genre. Once he showed that a prelude could successfully express a completely independent character all it's own in a short piece, the genre was never the same again. The

"Prelude" was no longer a warm-up piece or an introduction to anything, except perhaps as a prelude to a particular emotion or feeling.

The father of **Cesar Cui (1835-1918)** was a French soldier in Napoleon's army. After invading Russia and being injured in battle, he married a Lithuanian woman and settled down in Vilnius. **Cesar** learned musical notation by copying Chopin's Mazurkas and some Italian operas. He also had some music lessons. At 16 he entered engineering school and had advanced studies in military fortifications. He taught at 3 military academies in St. Petersburg and attained the rank of General in 1906. Meanwhile, in 1856, he met Mily Balakirev who helped him master musical composition. He composed many operas, some orchestral works, chamber music, songs and piano music. He was also a music critic for various newspapers until 1900 and was very critical of many composers, including Rachmaninoff. He was grouped with Balakirev, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov as the Russian "Mighty Five". His music is rarely performed today and is said to be best in miniatures such as the preludes.

**Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)** was born in Moscow. His mother was a concert pianist who unfortunately died of tuberculosis when he was an infant. At the Moscow Conservatory in 1888, he studied in the same piano class as Rachmaninoff. Except for a few orchestral works, his compositions are almost exclusively for piano solo. His earliest are in a style and genres that Chopin used such as preludes, etudes, nocturnes and mazurkas. His published preludes, written throughout his short life, number 85. He also wrote 10 sonatas which show his rapid evolution of composition. His melodic and harmonic style became influenced by theosophic doctrines and synesthesia, which in his case meant associating colors with certain keys. He considered music and the arts a means of transforming humanity, accelerating his spiritual evolution. He planned to compose a work titled "Mysterium" which would synthesize music, dance, scent, light, poetry and religion in one huge performance in the Himalayas. Only the text of a preliminary poem was completed upon his premature death at 43 from blood poisoning, resulting from an abscess on his lip. Immediately after his death, Rachmaninoff toured Russia in a series of all-Scriabin recitals. It was the first time he had played music other than his own in public and introduced many to Scriabin's works.

**Sergel Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)** was one of the world's great pianists, as can be heard on recordings. Music historians have argued about the quality of his compositions but the public and pianists still love his music. He was not interested in any of the new directions music took in the 20th century and kept to his style of Late Romanticism. His struggle with depression is well known. After the unsuccessful premier of his first symphony and the vicious attack on it by the music critic, **Cesar Cui**, Rachmaninoff could hardly write anything for 4 years. He sought psychiatric treatment and the result was his very successful second piano concerto which is still one of the most popular concertos today. He wrote his first prelude when he was a 19 year-old student in 1892. This piece in c#-minor dogged him his whole life, as he couldn't finish a concert without the audience demanding that he play it. He later wrote 23 more preludes to complete a set of one in every key. He probably hoped that he could substitute one of these for an encore, but none achieved the popularity of the first one.

With the outbreak of WWII, Rachmaninoff spent his remaining years in the US and became a citizen just a few weeks before his death from melanoma.

**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)** wrote 24 preludes in two books of 12, published in 1910 and 1913. He was famous for being rebellious and broke with tradition by not caring if he wrote one in each key. He also uncharacteristically gave each one a title. However, the titles come at the end of the piece. One supposes that he wanted the pianist to discover the prelude without having the title first. His unique sonorities and magical imagery are apparent in all of them.

Everyone is familiar with the music of **George Gershwin (1898-1937)**. His infectious melodies and rhythms are immediately pleasing to all. By applying a jazz idiom to classical forms he facilitated the playing of jazz for classical musicians. He enjoyed immediate success with his songs and shows, yet he still studied with composers to better learn compositional technique. He asked Maurice Ravel for lessons. As Ravel was aware of how much Gershwin was making from his musical comedies, he replied that he should be taking lessons from him. Gershwin's death from a brain tumor at age 38 robbed the world of much more music.

**Bohuslav Martinu (1890-1959)** was a prolific Czech composer who wrote almost 400 works, including symphonies, operas, ballets, chamber, vocal and instrumental works. He experimented with expressionism and jazz idioms. In the 1930's he found his main compositional style: neoclassicism as developed by Stravinsky. As a young student at the Prague conservatory, he fared poorly but astonished with his incredible brain for analyzing and memorizing music. After a concert he could write out large parts of the score almost perfectly. Much later analysis of his abilities suggest that he most likely had Asberger's Syndrome. This served him well with music composition, as he could "zone out" in deep concentration and work out music scores in his head.

**Nikolai Kapustin (1937- )** is a Ukrainian born Russian who showed great talent as a pianist and composer at a young age, composing his first piano sonata at 13. At 14 he was accepted into Moscow's Music College (Conservatory prep) where he said he really learned how to play the piano. In the early 50's jazz was prohibited in the Soviet Union, but Kapustin first heard American jazz greats Louis Armstrong, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman and Nat "King" Cole on "Voice of America" broadcasts. He was smitten. In 1956 he entered the Moscow Conservatory and was on track to become a concert pianist but as the ban on jazz lifted he composed his jazz inspired Op. 1 Concertino for Piano and Orchestra and performed it publicly in 1957. He never looked back and continued composing music in a jazz idiom clothed in classical forms. He arranged, composed and performed with various Russian Big Bands but has devoted himself totally to composition since the 1980's. His works include 20 piano sonatas, 6 piano concertos and many other piano solos, much chamber music as well as orchestral and big band music, all in jazz style. He doesn't consider himself a jazz pianist because jazz is supposed to be about improvisation and he carefully works out every detail. He lives with his wife, Alla, in Moscow and doesn't plan to stop composing.