
Prelude (Fr. *prélude*; Ger. *Vorspiel*; It., Sp. *preludio*; Lat. *praeludium, praeambulum*)

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A term of varied application that, in its original usage, indicated a piece that preceded other music whose tonic, mode, or key it was designed to introduce; was instrumental (the roots *ludus* and *Spiel* mean ‘played’ as opposed to ‘sung’); and was improvised (hence the French *préluder* and the German *präludieren*, meaning ‘to improvise’). The term ‘*praeambulum*’ (preamble) adds the rhetorical function of attracting the attention of an audience and introducing a topic.

The earliest notated preludes are for organ, and were used to introduce vocal music in church. Slightly later ones, for other chordal instruments such as the lute, grew out of improvisation and were a means of checking the tuning of the instrument and the quality of its tone, and of loosening the player’s fingers (as was the *Tastar de corde*). The purpose of notating improvisation was generally to provide models for students, so an instructive intention, often concerned with a particular aspect of instrumental technique, remained an important part of the prelude. Because improvisation may embrace a wide range of manners, styles, and techniques, the term was later applied to a variety of formal prototypes and to pieces of otherwise indeterminate genre.

1. Before 1800.

David Ledbetter

The oldest surviving preludes are the five short *praeambula* for organ in Adam Ileborgh’s tablature of 1448 (ed. in CEKM, i, 1963), where they are grouped together in a section headed ‘*Incipiunt praeludia diversarum notarum*’. Each consists of a florid, quasi-improvisatory right-hand part that decorates a simple shape in the left hand or pedal, such as the alternation of two sustained, two-part chords, or a descending scale. Conrad Paumann’s instructional *Fundamentum organisandi* (1452; ed. in CEKM, i, 1963) adds sequential interval patterns (*ascensus/descensus per tercias/per quartas*, etc.) such as are found in contemporary instructions for vocal improvisation (*contrapunto a mente*). The Buxheimer Orgelbuch (c1470; ed. in EDM, xxxvii–xxxix, 1958–9) makes a characteristic distinction between two predominant textures: simple sustained chords (*schlicht*) and florid passages (*colorirt*), a distinction later described by Praetorius (1619). Typically, the final of the piece forms part of the title (e.g. ‘*Praeambulum super C*’, ‘*super D*’, etc.).

These features remained fundamental to the prelude into the 16th century, when the original improvised character of written preludes began to give way to a more closely organized form. The keyboard tablatures of Leonhard Kleber (c1524) and Hans Kotter (before 1535) added new textures, Kleber's *praeambula* tending to sequential patterns that still suggest improvisation, and Kotter's *proeemia* contrasting light imitation with passages of antiphony between groups of voices. Similar features are found in the contemporary lute tablatures of Hans Judenkünig (1523) and Hans Neusidler (1536).

From the later 16th century the term 'praeludium' and its cognates were not commonly used in southern Germany, nor in Italy or Spain, where prelude-type pieces generally bore other titles (*see* *Intonazione*; *Intrada*; *Ricercare*; *Toccata*). More extended and brilliant pieces in free style were called 'toccata', such as those for chitarrone by Kapsberger (1604) and for keyboard by Frescobaldi (published 1615–37) and his pupils.

A parallel development continued in northern and central Germany under the title 'praeludium', the equivalence being underlined by titles such as 'Praeludium toccata' (Sweelinck) and 'Toccata vel praeludium' (Matthias Weckmann). The large-scale north German *praeludium pedaliter* for organ, the most elaborate of the prelude genre in the Baroque, began its development in the generation of Sweelinck's pupils. The *praeambula* of Scheidemann typically have a free opening section, an imitative or fugal middle section and a free closing section. Into this sectional structure Tunder and particularly Weckmann introduced more stylistically diverse elements derived from the southern German toccatas and canzonas of Froberger. The peak of this development was the large multi-sectional *praeludia* by Buxtehude. They contrast free virtuoso flourishes with elaborately worked fugal sections, and the traditional rhetorical style with the motor energy of the new Italian manner, and often have subtle motivic and other links between sections.

These are highly sophisticated examples of a type of improvisation customary before and after the Lutheran service. Instructions for such improvisations are given by various writers, notably F.E. Niedt (1706). Some of the *praeludia* of Kuhnau's first *Clavier-Übung* (1689) come close to Niedt's description. Other places in the service where 'praeludiren' was in order were before concerted music, where writers from Praetorius (1619) to Türk (1787) exhorted organists to keep to keys involving open strings, to allow discreet tuning, before modulating to the key of the piece; and before the singing of a chorale, a practice that led to the development of the chorale prelude (*see* *Chorale settings*, §II). In a secular context, the practice of group improvisation by instruments under the title 'praeludium' is mentioned by Fuhrmann (1706) and, in France, by Brossard (1703). Techniques for improvising on solo woodwind instruments are described by Hotteterre in *L'art de preluder* (1719); Rousseau (1768) listed in addition short improvised preludes for voice.

Among the few notated examples from France in the 16th century are those published by Attaignant (1530, 1531). The 17th century saw a highly distinctive development of the prelude as a genre in France, associated particularly with the lute. Preludes from early in the century are indistinguishable from polyphonic fantasias, but around 1620 examples by Lespine and in Lord Herbert's manuscript (**GB-Cfm**) show a rhythmic loosening that suggests that the semi-measured and unmeasured prelude for solo lute, viol, or harpsichord may have developed as much from this direction as from the elaboration of a tuning routine (see *Prélude non mesuré*). The highly sophisticated semi-measured lute preludes of Mesangeau (1620s and 30s) explore different voices of the lute in an improvisatory manner, while retaining references to contrapuntal genres. The 1620s and 30s also saw the establishment of the prelude at the head of the solo instrumental dance suite, the first published example being Chancy's *Tablature de mandore* (1629).

The polyphonic prelude was continued in France on the organ. The frequent use of an opening point of imitation consisting of a slow-moving scale segment, sonorous dissonances (especially major 7ths, 9ths, and augmented 5ths), and evaded cadences in order to avoid the establishment of subsidiary tonal centres, suggests that these were improvisational commonplaces. The ensemble prelude, though initially less common than the *entrée*, was a steady feature of French opera from Lully to Rameau, used to introduce an *air* or scene.

French influence in Italy led in the 1680s to the association of the prelude with a suite with sonata features in the *sonata da camera*. Corelli's chamber sonatas (1685, 1694) open with a *Preludio* of a type similar to the initial Grave or Largo of his church sonatas, while the more varied preludes of the violin sonatas (1700) provided models for the opening movement of the later Baroque sonata. This association continued in the ensemble *Concerts* of François Couperin (1722, 1724) and in the solo suites for violin, cello, and harpsichord of Bach. With Bach the prelude reached the pinnacle of its development, both in its compositional quality and in its range of styles, manners, and formal prototypes. His early organ preludes developed the sectional *praeludium* of Böhm and Buxtehude, while those after about 1713 generally exploit the fertile possibilities of the Vivaldian *ritornello* principle for unifying an extended movement in a single span. Bach's most systematic demonstration of the variety of the prelude as a genre is in *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* (1722). This brought to fruition in tonal terms the tradition, already present in Illeborgh, of providing preludes in some or all of the eight or 12 modes. Series of *Magnificat* versets for organ, generally consisting of a *praeambulum*, five fugal versets, and a finale in each of the eight church modes, were published in both Catholic and Lutheran areas, for example by Kerll (1686) and Speth (1692). With the development of tonality this cyclic concept was extended in prelude collections to cover all or most of the 24 major and minor keys, for example in the 30 preludes for 12-course lute by John Wilson (written in the 1640s) and the prelude collections of the French lutenist Bocquet (c1680). More directly in Bach's ambit was the *Ariadne musica* of J.C.F. Fischer (1702), a verset-type collection for organ with a single *praeludium* and *fuga* in each of 19

keys. Bach was the first to provide keyboard examples in all 24 keys. His collection is also didactic, using preludes to demonstrate techniques of fingering and composition, and including examples of many formal prototypes which the unspecific title 'praeludium' allowed him to treat with some freedom. The second book (completed by 1742) adds large-scale binary types that by then would more normally be termed 'sonata'.

The prelude and fugue for keyboard continued into the late 18th century in central and northern Germany, particularly with Bach's pupils, though not with his sons, and also with Albrechtsberger in Vienna. According to Mozart (letter of 20 July 1778) there were at that time two sorts of keyboard prelude: one that modulated from one key to another, of which he himself wrote some examples (1777) and others are in Soler's *Llave de la modulacion* (1762) and Beethoven's op.39 (1789); and a freely improvised type whose function was to test the keyboard. The second type commonly included arpeggiated sections and continued the sort of prelude that had introduced the harpsichord suites of Handel (1720) and later sonatas such as those of G.B. Martini (1742) and Giuseppe Sarti (1769). Such pieces by then were more commonly called 'fantasia'.

2. From 1800.

Howard Ferguson

The 19th century's awakening interest in music of earlier times encouraged a revival of forms that had fallen into disuse. The attached prelude reappeared in a number of Bach-influenced works, such as Mendelssohn's Six Preludes and Fugues for piano op.35 (1832-7), Liszt's Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H (1855), Brahms's two preludes and fugues for organ (1856-7), Franck's *Prélude, choral et fugue* for piano (1884), and Reger's Prelude and Fugue for violin op.117. More typical of the Romantic period and its aftermath, however, are the many independent preludes for piano, whose prototype was Chopin's matchless set of 24 Preludes op.28 of 1836-9. (They were not the first: Hummel had published a set of 24 preludes 'in the major and minor keys', op.67, some 20 years earlier.) Although some of his preludes are epigrammatically short, others are so large in scale and so dramatic in content that they would overshadow any alien sequel to which they might be attached. It seems likely, therefore, that they were always intended either to be played as a complete cycle or to serve as a quarry from which shorter homogeneous groups could be made up. Chopin's collection was the model for those of Stephen Heller (op.81), Alkan (op.31), Cui (op.64), and Busoni (op.37), each of which contains 24 or (in the cases of Alkan and Cui) 25 independent preludes in the major and minor keys, and seems to have established the prelude as an important kind of non-programmatic characteristic piece, subsequently exploited by such composers as Skryabin, Szymanowski, Rachmaninoff, Debussy, Kabalevsky, Antheil, Gershwin, Messiaen, Ginastera, Scelsi, and Martinů. These preludes have no prefatory function and are simply collections of short pieces exploring particular moods, musical figures, or

technical problems, and drawing on a wide range of influences including jazz, folk music, and dance forms. Debussy's have programmatic titles, which are otherwise rare. His *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is an orchestral tone poem.

Schoenberg's Prelude op.44 for chorus and orchestra is one of the few attached preludes written in the 20th century which was not (unlike those of Shostakovich, Schedrin and N.V. Bertzon) intended as an evocation of the Baroque type. It was composed as the first movement of a suite commissioned from several composers by the American publisher Nathaniel Shilkret; Schoenberg's section was to precede a depiction of the Creation, and its mood is skilfully conveyed both by orchestral effects and by the restriction of the choral part to vowel sounds rather than words. The unattached prelude was taken up by avant-garde composers of the mid-20th century: John Cage wrote *Prelude for Meditation* for prepared piano, and electronic resources were used by François-Bernard Mâche (*Prélude*, 1959) and Branimir Sakač (*Aleatory Prelude*, 1961).

Liszt's symphonic poem *Les préludes* is unrelated to the musical genre, as it took its name (as well as its programme) from a poem by Lamartine.

See also: Vorspiel.

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