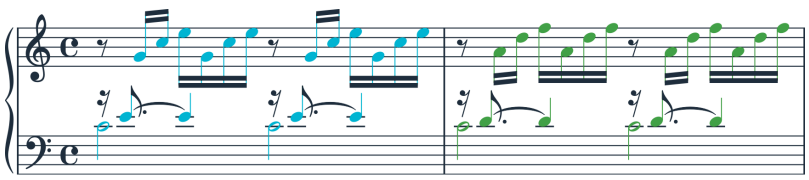Inside Bach's *Prelude in C*

Johann Sebastian Bach, Prelude in C major, BWV 846 (1722) — one chord in every bar

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) finished the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in **1722**: 24 preludes and fugues, one pair in every major and minor key. "Well-tempered" means the keyboard is tuned so that music in every key sounds good. This prelude opens the whole book; an earlier version is in the music book Bach began in 1720 for his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann. In 1853 the French composer **Charles Gounod** wrote a melody to float over it, and sung to the words of the *Ave Maria* it became the famous Bach–Gounod *Ave Maria*.

THE PATTERN · ONE CHORD, BROKEN



Bars 1–2 as Bach wrote them: bar 1 in **cyan**, bar 2 in **green**.

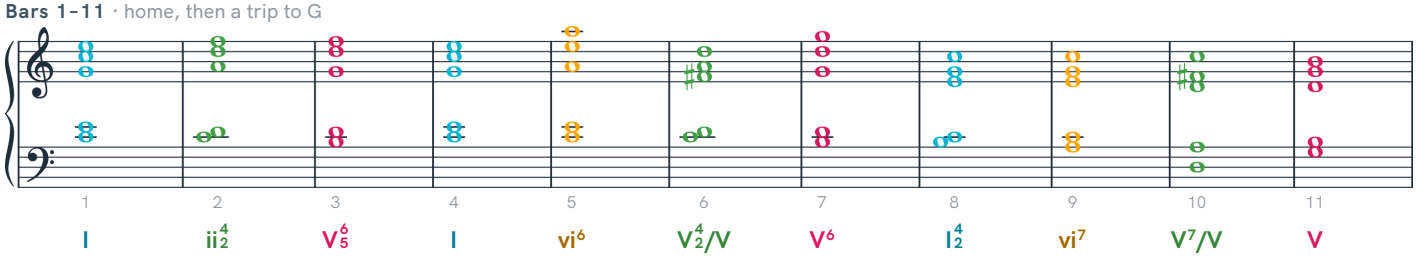
Every bar works the same way. The left hand plays a low note and holds it, then a second note above it; the right hand adds **three more notes and plays them twice**. Then the whole half bar comes again. All five notes belong to **one chord**, so each bar is a broken chord (Handout 51). Bar 1 is C major, C–E–G. Bar 2 keeps the C in the bass and turns the rest into D–F–A–C, a D minor 7th.

THE WHOLE PRELUDE IN 35 CHORDS

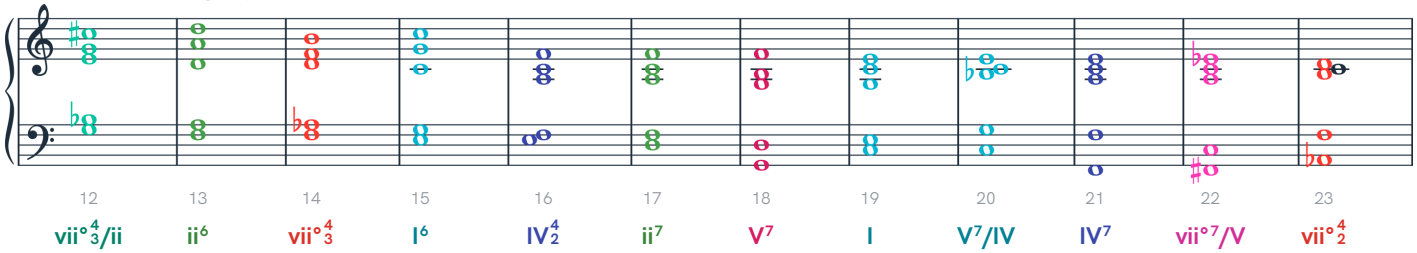
Stack each bar's notes into one chord and the whole piece fits in three lines. Every chord wears the color of its **root**, and the numeral under it names the chord in C major. The small numbers say what is in the bass: 6 or 6/4 for a triad with its 3rd or 5th there; 7, 6/5, 4/3 or 4/2 for a 7th chord with its root, 3rd, 5th or 7th there (Handouts 01, 212 and 388).

C (I, home) · D · F · G (V) · A · B · C♯ · F♯ · outside the chord (bar 23)

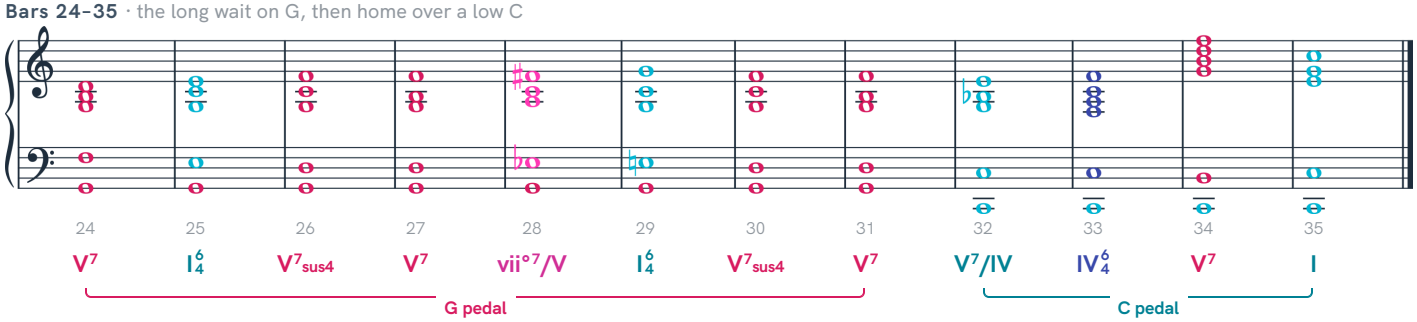
Bars 1–11 · home, then a trip to G



Bars 12–23 · home again past two diminished 7ths (to bar 19), then the bass closes in on G



Bars 24–35 · the long wait on G, then home over a low C



Bar 23's ink C is kept from bar 22: it is not part of the new chord. Where the pedal note is not in the chord (bars 28 and 34), the numeral has no bass figure; a pedal note keeps its own color throughout. Bars 33–34 show the chord of their first half.

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VISITORS AND PEDALS

Where the chords travel

Visitors from outside the key

Most bars use only the white keys of C major. A few bring a sharp or a flat, and each of those leads somewhere:

D7 in bars 6 and 10 is the V7 of G, "five of five" (Handout 235). Its F♯ rises to G, and in bar 11 the music lands on G.

Diminished 7ths (Handout 210): **C♯–E–G–B♭** in bar 12 leads to D minor, **B–D–F–A♭** in bar 14 to C, and **F♯–A–C–E♭** in bar 22 to G: each root sits a half step below the chord it leads to. The last two come back over new bass notes in bars 23 and 28.

C7 in bar 20 adds B♭ to the home chord: now it is the V7 of F, and bar 21 is F.
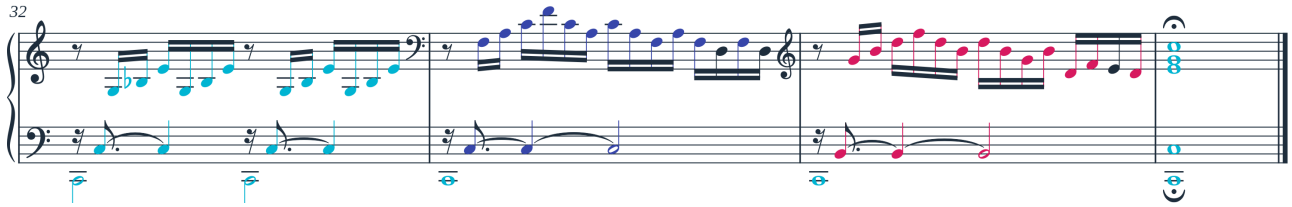
The long wait on G

From bar 24 the bass stays on **low G** for eight bars while the chords above it keep changing. A bass that holds still under moving harmony is a **pedal point** (Handout 75 has another). G is the dominant, so all eight bars feel like a long breath before home.

Above it you meet a C chord over G, the cadential 6/4 (Handout 383), and V7sus4: C in place of B, which slips down to B in the next bar (Handout 226).

In bar 32 the bass drops to **low C**, the tonic, and stays there to the end.

BARS 32–35 · THE PATTERN BREAKS



Bars 32–35 over the **low C**. Ink = notes outside the chord: the D's at the end of bar 33 and the passing E in bar 34.

For 32 bars the pattern never changes. Then it breaks: in bar 33 the right hand sweeps up and down an **F major** chord, in bar 34 a **G7**, both over the low C, and bar 35 is the final **C major** chord under a fermata (Handout 43). Give the last bars their full length.

Counting bars? Some old editions have 36: they add a bar after bar 22 that Bach did not write (it comes from a handwritten copy by Christian Schwencke). Bach's manuscript has 35, and so does this handout.

PRACTICE RECIPE

1. **Block it first.** Play each bar as one chord, both hands together, and name it (page 1 is your map). Move from chord to chord with as little hand movement as you can.
2. **Then break it, half a bar at a time,** slowly: low note, second note, then the three right-hand notes twice. Hold the two left-hand notes through the whole half bar.
3. **Listen inside the left hand.** In bars 11–15 its upper note walks down by half steps: B, B♭, A, A♭, G. Let that line be heard.
4. **Even and quiet.** Every sixteenth the same size, with no bump at the start of each group. The changing chords make the music, not accents.
5. **Shape the plan:** a little more sound toward the visitors, a long breath over the G pedal from bar 24, and a calm arrival on the low C in bar 32.

TRY IT Play the 35 chords of page 1 as a slow hymn, one chord to a beat. Then play the same bars as Bach wrote them. Can you hear the hymn inside the pattern? Listen for each time the music comes home to C major (I).

LISTEN
Scan to hear the prelude and its 35 chords
tissimo.co/worksheets/bach-prelude-in-c
Full sheet in our sheet music library:
tissimo.co/sheet-music/prelude-in-c-major-wtc-1-bwv-846-1

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