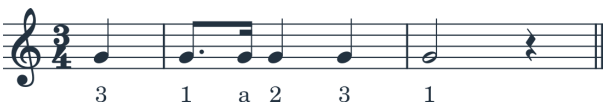Inside Chopin's *Prelude in A Major*

Frédéric Chopin, Prelude Op. 28 No. 7 (published 1839) — one rhythm told eight times, and one surprise

This is No. 7 of the 24 preludes Chopin finished on Majorca in the winter of 1838–39 (Handout 345 tells their story). It is one of the shortest pieces he ever published: a pickup and 16 bars, marked **Andantino** (a gentle walking pace) and *p dolce*, soft and sweet. In 3/4, with a lilt on the first beat, it sounds like a slow **mazurka**, the Polish dance Chopin wrote all his life.

ONE RHYTHM, EIGHT TIMES
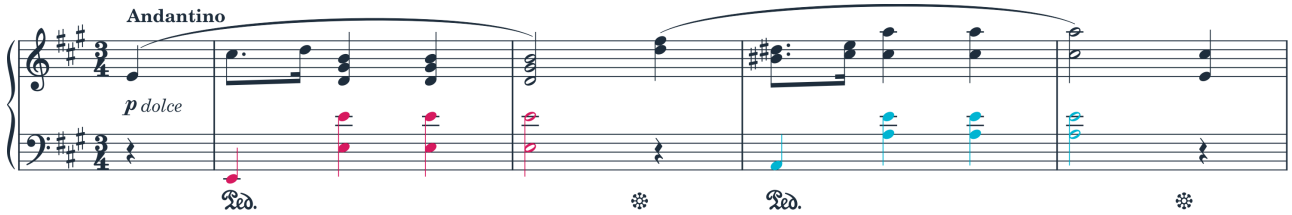


Every phrase starts with a pickup and has the same rhythm: a long-short **skip** on beat 1 (a dotted eighth and a sixteenth, Handout 66), two quarters, then a **held chord and a breath**. Chopin tells it eight times and never changes a note value. What changes is the harmony underneath.

V	I	V	I	V	I	V7/ii	ii	V	I
question	answer	question	answer	question	answer?	surprise	B minor	E	home
1–2	3–4	5–6	7–8	9–10	11	12	13	14	15–16

bars (each phrase also has its pickup on beat 3 of the bar before)
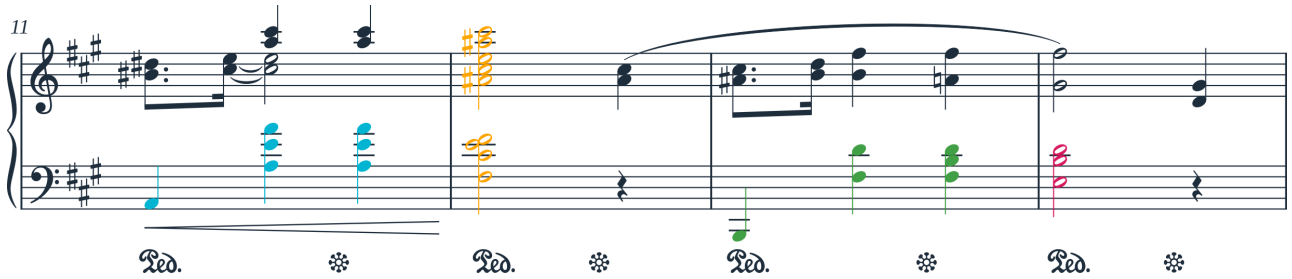
QUESTION AND ANSWER



Pickup and bars 1–4. Left hand in the color of the chord: **V** (E7) magenta, **I** (A major) cyan.

Under the repeated rhythm, the harmony rocks between two chords. Phrase 1 ends on **V**, the dominant (E–G♯–B–D, Handout 212): it sounds like a question. Phrase 2 ends on **I**, A major: the answer, home (Handout 232). Question, answer, question, answer, question: by phrase 6 you expect the answer again.

THE SURPRISE · BAR 12



Bars 11–14: **I**, **V7/ii** (both hands), **ii**, **V**.

Bar 11 starts like an answer, but bar 12 swells into a new chord: **F♯–A♯–C♯–E**, an F♯7. The A♯ is a note A major does not have. F♯7 is the V7 of B minor, a secondary dominant (V7/ii, Handout 235), and B minor arrives in bar 13. From there the prelude closes with a classic ending: **ii** (B minor), **V** (E), **I** (A).

LISTEN

Scan to hear the prelude and bar 12, plain and rolled
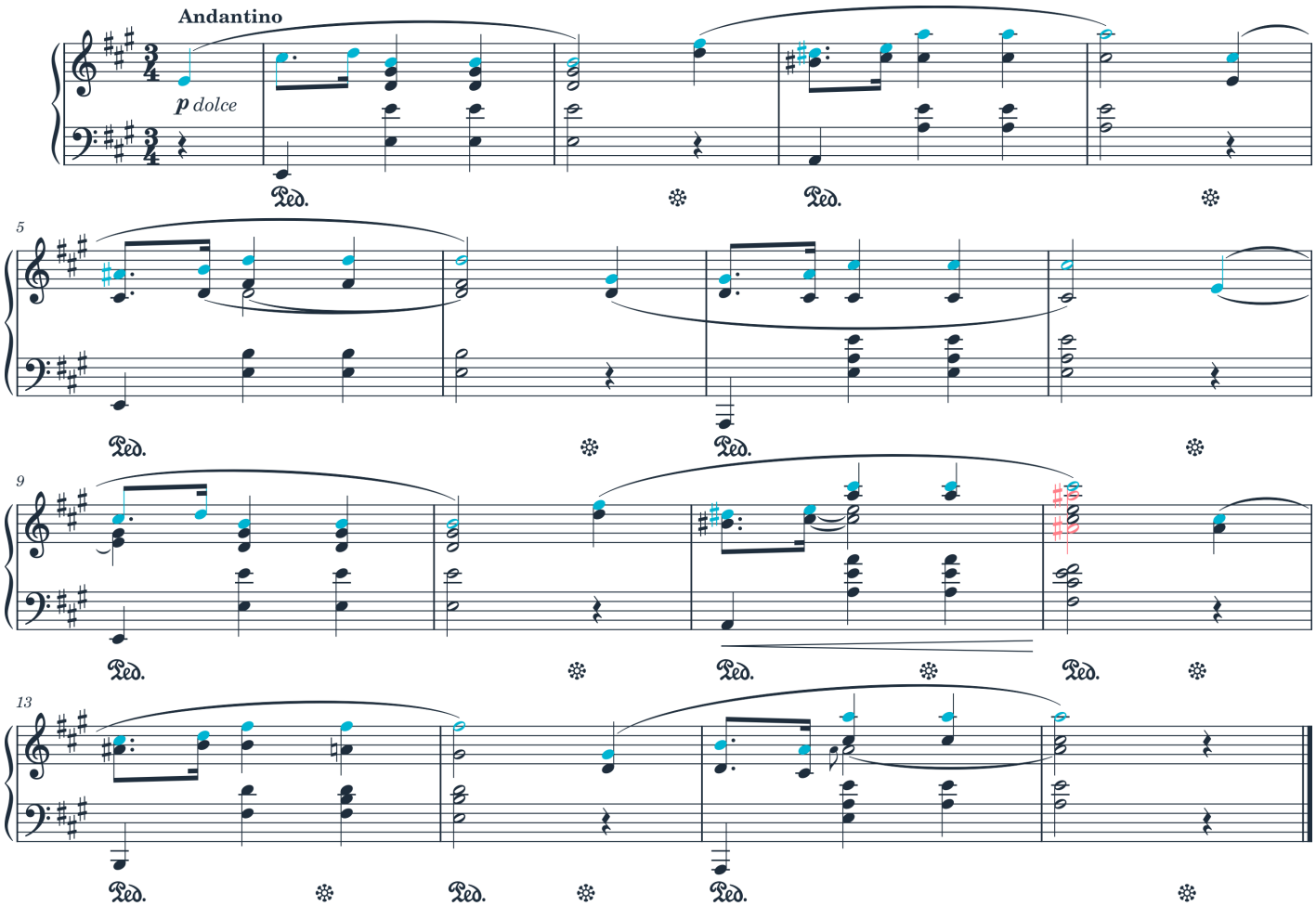
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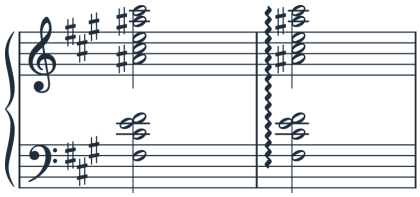
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THE WHOLE PRELUDE



First edition (Paris, 1839), plus the natural it forgot in bar 13. **Cyan** = the melody (top notes); **coral** = the A♯s of bar 12.

Bar 12 · the biggest chord



Plain, then rolled (the sign is added here)

Nine notes at once, and the right hand spans a tenth, A♯ to C♯. The first edition prints a **1** beside both of its lowest notes: the thumb lies flat and takes A♯ and C♯ together.

If you cannot reach, **roll** it: play the notes quickly one after another, from the bottom up like a harp, and let the pedal hold them. A wavy line before a chord asks for a roll; here the choice is yours, not Chopin's.

PRACTICE RECIPE

1. **Left hand alone:** the low note, then two soft chords, like a slow waltz. Name each phrase's chord: V or I. Add the pedal as printed: down with the low note, up at the breath; in bars 11–14 a new pedal in every bar (Handout 58).
2. **Right hand alone,** the top notes only (the cyan line). Then add the notes underneath, softer: they are the melody's shadow.
3. **The skip:** hold the dotted eighth its full length and keep the sixteenth light, a lift into beat 2, never a jerk.
4. **Hands together** with the pedal, one phrase at a time, each one leaning toward its held chord and then breathing. Let bar 12 be the warmest moment, and the last phrase the softest.

TRY IT Play only the left hand's first note in each phrase's first bar (E, A, E, A, E, A) and say "question" or "answer". Then play bars 11–14 and listen for the moment the answer turns into a surprise.

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