Inside Chopin's *Prelude in E Minor*

Frédéric Chopin, Prelude Op. 28 No. 4 (published 1839) — a sighing melody over chords that sink one note at a time

Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849) wrote 24 preludes, one in every major and minor key, and finished them on the island of Majorca in the winter of 1838–39. They were published in 1839. Most are very short; this one is only 25 bars long (No. 7 in A major, Handout 380, has only 16), marked **Largo** (very slow, Handout 55). It became one of his best-loved pieces: at Chopin's own funeral in Paris, on 30 October 1849, the organist played it, together with the Prelude in B minor (No. 6).

THE OPENING · A MELODY THAT SIGHS



Pickup and bars 1–4. The melody in **cyan**.

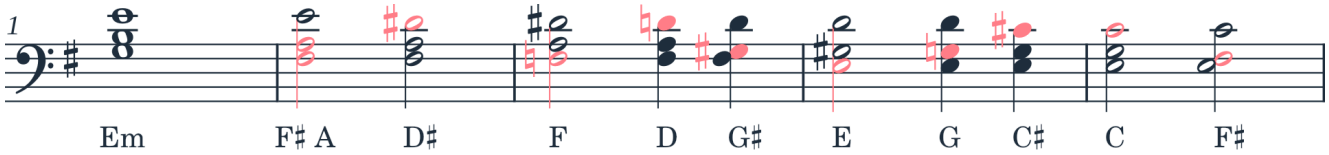
The right hand · B and C

For three bars the melody hardly moves: a long **B**, then a short **C** that leans on it and falls back. It sounds like a sigh. In bar 4 the C becomes B♭, and from bar 5 the whole sigh sits one step lower, on **A and B**. The melody is sinking too, slowly.

The left hand · a soft heartbeat

The left hand plays **repeated eighth-note chords**, eight to a bar, almost without a break until bar 23. They are the background, so keep them very soft and even, like a quiet pulse. The music lives in how these chords **change**.

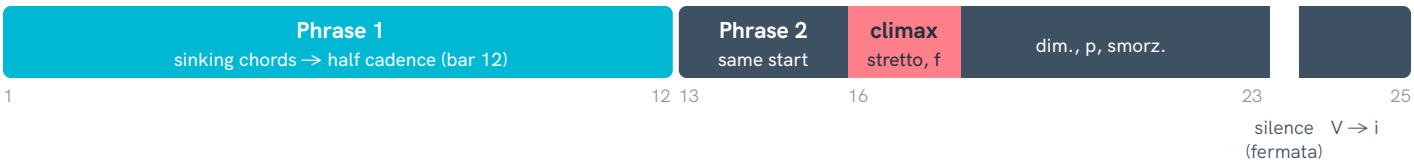
UNDER THE MELODY · ONE NOTE AT A TIME



The left hand of bars 1–5 with the repeated eighths merged into held chords. **Coral** = the note that moved; its name is printed underneath.

The prelude starts on an **E minor chord** (G–B–E). After that, Chopin does not move from chord to chord the usual way. Instead, he lets **one note slip down a half step** while the other two hold: E to D♯, then F♯ to F, then D♯ to D, and so on. From the middle of bar 2 to the end of bar 8 there are 13 changes, and every single one works like that. Some stops sound like chords you know (E–G♯–D in bar 4 sounds like an E7), but none of them goes where that chord normally goes: each one just slides on. This is **voice leading**: three lines creeping down by half steps (Handout 49), not a chord progression. It only settles in bars 9–12, which rock between C–E–A and B–D♯–A and stop on B–D♯–A, the dominant seventh of E minor (Handout 212): a half cadence, then a breath.

THE PLAN · ONE IDEA, TOLD TWICE



The prelude is two long phrases. The second starts exactly like the first, then **breaks out** in bar 16 and climbs to the climax (page 2). It fades into a silence before the final chords.

LISTEN

Scan to hear the whole prelude and the bars on this sheet

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BAR 13 STARTS AGAIN · AND BREAKS OUT

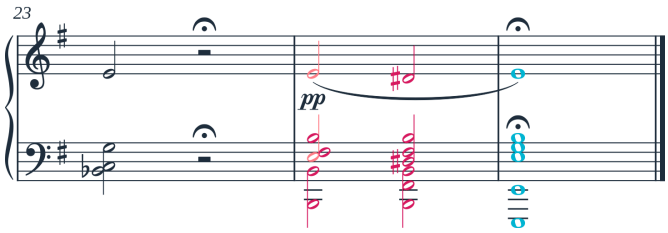
The climax: *stretto*, then *forte*



Bars 16–17. The melody in **cyan**.

Bar 13 begins the opening all over again, but this time the sigh cannot stay put. In bar 16, marked *stretto* ("pressing on": a little faster and more urgent), the melody jumps up to G with a **turn** on the A♯ before it (Handout 54). Bar 17 is the only *forte* in the piece: the left hand leaps to a deep B and the right hand reaches its highest note, the **high C**. Chopin's manuscript and the first edition mark the pedal only here, in bars 17 and 18. Then it all falls away: *dim.*, *p*, and *smorz.* (*smorzando*, dying away).

Bars 23–25 · silence, then the cadence



In bar 23 the music stops on a strange, unsettled chord (B♭, C, E and G) — E minor's German sixth with A♯ written B♭ (Handout 387) — and then **everything goes silent** under a fermata (Handout 64). Hold that silence: it is part of the music. Then, *pp*, the plainest ending there is: **V** (B major) to **i** (E minor). Even here the **E** sinks to D♯ first: one last sigh.

Pedal and tone

Most players use the pedal throughout, but **change it whenever the left hand changes**: press the new chord, then lift and catch it again with the pedal (legato pedal, Handout 58). Change too late and the old note smears into the new one, and the half-step slide is lost.

Let the melody **sing** over the chords: play it with arm weight and a slow key, and keep the left hand a few levels softer.

PRACTICE RECIPE

1. **Left hand alone, as held chords** (like the coral figure on page 1). Say aloud which note moves. Keep the hand shape and let only that one finger change; for example 5–3–1 on G–B–E and on F♯–A–E (a suggestion: your teacher may prefer another).
2. **Then the repeated eighths,** very soft, from the surface of the keys: the fingers never leave them. Aim for eight identical chords per bar.
3. **Right hand alone,** singing. Shape each sigh: the long note full, the short note lighter, leaning back into the next long note.
4. **Hands together,** slowly, with legato pedal on every change. Listen that no old note hangs on.
5. **Shape the whole piece:** quiet and still to bar 12, pressing on through bars 16–17, then fading. Count the rest in bar 23 to its full length, and longer.

TRY IT Play the held chords of bars 2–8 and, every time a note slips down, sing that note. You are singing the slow line hidden inside the left hand.

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