

J.S. Bach

Prelude in C



Staying with the greats **Bridget Mermikides** transcribes a true musical milestone from Bach's Well Tempered Clavier for solo classical guitar.

ABILITY RATING

● ● ● ● ● Moderate/Advanced

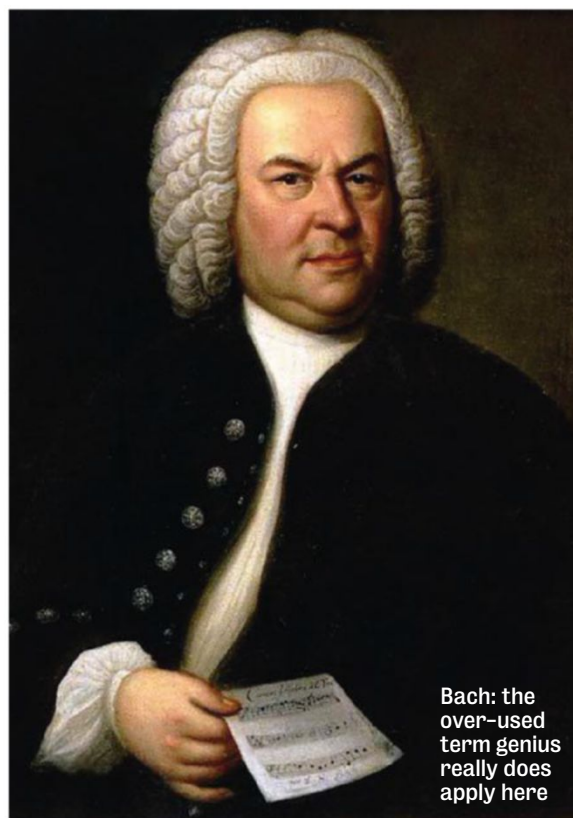
INFO	WILL IMPROVE YOUR
KEY: C	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Arpeggios
TEMPO: 60 bpm	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Harmonic understanding
CD: TRACK 44-45	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Baroque repertoire

ALTHOUGH JOHANN SEBASTIAN Bach didn't receive significant appreciation during his lifetime, he is now a considered one of the greatest and most influential composers of all time. His staggering body of work is now universally praised and adored by musicians. His technical control and deep expression has had a profound influence not just on Western Art music but also on a range of diverse idioms including modernism, metal, jazz, pop, electronica, tango and beyond. Many speak of his music as being of such musical perfection, that it has some kind of higher 'Truth', eternal through the ages. When it was suggested that a Bach piece might be included on the Voyager probe as evidence of earthly intelligence to any alien lifeforms who might intercept it, a colleague of astronomer Carl Sagan objected, saying: "That would be just showing off".

I've selected Bach's ever-popular Prelude in C major, the opening piece from The Well-Tempered Clavier. Completed in 1722, this book of 24 preludes and fugues for keyboard (one for every major and minor key in a particular 'well-tempered' tuning system) was written at a time in Bach's life where he had a supportive patron and an artistic freedom to hone the instrumental and secular aspects of his craft with some autonomy, as opposed to the gruelling

and often restrictive working environment he endured for much of his later life.

The Prelude in C Major is made up largely of a repeating (and quite 'guitaristic') arpeggio pattern that travels through an exquisite harmonic progression. Bach's genius is evident in the way that he takes the largely 'functional' harmony and imbues it with elegance by the use of inversions (which of the chord degrees is in the bass), voice-leading (how one chord moves to the next) voicings (how the notes are spread out) and pedal tones (the use of static notes against a moving harmony). For example




Bach: the over-used term genius really does apply here

“Prelude in C is one of those pieces that sounds like it should be relatively easy, but turns out to be somewhat trickier than expected.”

notice how the simple C major chords in bars 1, 15, 25 and 29 – which any lesser composer may treat as identical – differ in terms of voicing and inversion as the piece progresses. There's also a beautiful use of major 7 chords presented in third inversion (7th in the bass) in bars 8 and 16 (C/B and F/E respectively) – a gorgeous and progressive sonority. Many pieces from this period would end with I-IV-V7-I (C-F-G7-C), but Bach creates a wonderful and sophisticated ending from this simply framework. For example a C7 is included in bar 32 (a 'secondary dominant' of F) to move to F and then a C pedal tone in the bass is sustained through bars 33 and 34, which – with the G7 chord – above it creates an engaging tension.

This is one of those pieces that sounds like it should be relatively easy, but turns out to be somewhat trickier than expected. Although the arpeggio pattern is repetitive, rhythmically even and not too fast, the keyboard voicings are often close in the bass, requiring slurs, stretches and some octave displacements to make the piece playable on the guitar.

I've kept to the original key of C major, but used drop D tuning which widens the range of possible voicings. As ever, be patient in practice – using the tab captions to help you through the trickier sections – and you'll be rewarded with an extraordinary piece to enjoy for years to come. 



TRACK RECORD Glenn Gould's Bach recordings have reached an almost mythical status (Sony 1965) so are a great place to start. For a more contemporary interpretation try award-winning Martin Stadtfeld's recording (Sony 2008), and to hear it on a period instrument and (as far as we know) tuning 'temperament' try Richard Egarr's 2007 Harmonia Mundi release.

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 45

[General] This amazing piece consists of a semiquaver arpeggio figure throughout. It's a lot more technically simple to play on keyboard than guitar, but it's nice to have it in our repertoire. The first four bars work very easily – allow the bass note to sustain throughout the bar, and the arpeggio notes can also be allowed to ring on. There is some picking hand fingering indicated at the start. At bar 5 you need a first finger barre at the 2nd fret

and the fourth finger frets across the top two strings.

[Bar 8] At bars 8 and 9 it is not physically possible to sustain the bass notes and this is where the guitar transposition loses its consistency and is unfortunately slightly compromised. The same thing happens a few more times in the piece so the aim is to simply play as smoothly and fluently as possible, to keep the listener focused on the lovely harmonic sequences.

♩ = 60 C

Altered tuning

1 p p i m a i m a p p i m a i m a

2 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1

3 2 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1

4 2 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1

5 2 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1

6 p i m a

7 2 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1

8 2 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 0 3 1

9 0 3 2 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1 0 1

10 p i p i m p i m 0 0 5 4 5 4 5 0 0 5 4 5 4 5

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 45

[Bar 12] Hold down a full 5th fret barre throughout, and do the same at bar 14 (where it's a 3rd fret barre). There is a bit of a stretch at bar 18, so aim to

keep the first and fourth fingers of the fretting hand extended and straight, in order to reach the shape.

G **Gdim7**

11 5 2 0 0 0 0 0 5 2 0 0 0 0 0 5 8 7 5 6 7 5 6 5 8 7 5 6

Dm/F **Fdim7**

13 3 0 0 2 3 0 2 3 0 0 2 3 0 2 3 3 6 5 3 4 5 3 4 3 6 5 3 4 5 3 4

p p i m a i m a

C/E **F/E**

15 2 0 0 1 0 1 0 0 1 0 1 2 3 2 1 1 2 1 1 2 3 2 1 1 2 1 1

p m p m

Dm7 **G7**

17 0 3 2 1 1 2 1 1 0 3 2 1 1 2 1 1 5 0 0 1 0 0 1 0 0 1 0 0 1

C **C7**

19 3 2 0 1 0 1 0 2 0 1 0 1 0 0 3 1 0 3 1 0 0 3 1 0 3 1 0

PLAYING TIPS

CD TRACK 45

[Bar 22] Another full barre (4th fret) is needed at bar 22 and 23 and is a little bit fiddly. Try following the suggested picking hand fingering and aim to allow the notes to sustain and ring over each other where possible. Use another 5th fret full barre at bars 28 to 30 and again try the suggested

fretting hand solution at bar 31 – hopping across the first finger it means losing the bass note G slightly early, but it's a bit smoother than starting bar 31 on the fourth finger. Practise slowly and neatly to achieve a secure technique. I hope you enjoy learning this wonderful piece.

The musical score for J.S. Bach's Prelude in C major, measures 21-33, is presented in a guitar-specific format. It consists of five systems, each containing three measures. The treble staff shows the melodic line with notes and stems, while the bass staff shows the fret numbers for each note. Chord symbols are placed above the staff to indicate the harmonic structure. The score includes a 'rit' (ritardando) marking at measure 32, indicating a gradual deceleration. The measure numbers 21, 24, 27, 30, and 33 are marked at the beginning of each system.