



Given the shortness of many of these preludes there is quite a bit of potential for the music to be useful for teaching purposes and as possible repertoire for performance competitions. Although assigning levels of difficulty can be very subjective, John Burge suggests the following grade levels. Please note that many of the consecutively numbered preludes sharing the same key signature have a natural connection and flow easily one into the other. As such, these pairs have often been joined together in the list below, requiring that both preludes be performed as a unit to satisfy the indicated level of difficulty. However, some of the preludes are so short (especially Numbers 2, 11 and 14) that they have simply been listed as optional preludes to perform with the Prelude sharing the same key signature, although it is always stronger to play two contrasting preludes to demonstrate a performer's musicianship and technical facility.

- Grade 8: -Prelude No. 5 in D [Published in the Canadian National Conservator of Music *Northern Lights* 8B)
 -Prelude No. 8 in F Sharp Minor
- Grade 9: -Prelude No. 1 in C Major (optional to add No. 2 in A minor)
 -Prelude No. 7 in A Major
- Grade 10: -Preludes No. 3 in G Major AND No. 4 in E Minor
 -Prelude No. 6 in B Minor
 -Prelude No. 13 in F Sharp Major (optional to add No. 14 in E Flat Minor)
 -Preludes No. 17 in A Flat Major AND No. 18 in F Minor
 -Preludes No. 21 in B Flat Major AND No. 22 in G Minor
- Diploma: -Preludes No. 9 in E Major AND No. 10 in C Sharp Minor
 -Prelude No. 12 in G Sharp Minor (optional to add No. 11 in B Major)
 -Preludes No. 15 in D Flat Major AND No. 16 in B Flat Minor
 -Preludes No. 19 in E Flat Major AND No. 20 in C Minor
 -Preludes No. 23 in F Major AND No. 24 in D Minor

Given the number of precedents in the world of Classical music, it is fair to state that there is a long traditional of composing a set of **Twenty-Four Preludes** for solo piano. John Burge's preludes draw their primary influence from Chopin's Opus 28 set in that Burge also composes one prelude in each major and minor key, employing the exact same ordering of keys used by Chopin. Beginning with the first two preludes in C major and A minor (the major and minor keys sharing the same key signature) the pattern of keys repeats by ascending Perfect Fifths (Numbers 3 and 4 are in G major and E minor) until reaching the final pair of preludes in F major and D minor. While Chopin was writing music in the highly chromaticized harmonic language of the early 19th century, in 2015, the year that Burge completed his set, the concept of tonality has undergone so many developments since Chopin's time that there are now whole schools of musical techniques that produce music that is quite atonal. As an all-governing principle for his set of preludes though, Burge made it a personal requirement that each prelude had to embrace its tonic key in a decisively audible fashion.

It will be apparent to anyone playing or listening to Burge's preludes that the ones in minor keys are often the most vividly dramatic. Indeed, numbers 6, 12, 18 and 24 are sufficiently expansive that they generate a strong sense of ending which structurally groups the entire work into four blocks of six prelude subsets. It will also be obvious that the higher numbered preludes are generally more technically difficult and longer. The other way that the preludes can be divided is discernable in the arrangement of the eight preludes that use non-traditional piano performance techniques. Numbers 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20 and 23 involve such things as creating bell-like harmonics, strumming strings inside the piano, knocking on the wooden frame and plucking strings. Although the means by which sound is activated in these specific preludes might be somewhat novel, harmonically these preludes are often the most emphatically tonal music of the entire work.

This composition is dedicated to Canadian pianist, Mathew Walton. John Burge had the pleasure of adjudicating Mathew in piano performance competitions in Ontario early in his career and Mathew eventually tracked down some of John Burge's music while studying at the University of Ottawa and then the University of Alberta. A fabulous pianist, Mathew not only performed John Burge's **Prelude Variations**, for piano and orchestra, with the University of Alberta Symphony Orchestra (a work based on Chopin's Prelude in C minor, Op. 28, No. 20),

but he also made a comprehensive study of the first nine installments of Burge's **Studies for Poetry** series. Around this time, Mathew also gave John Burge a translation of Czeslaw Milosz's book of poetry entitled, **Bells in Winter**. Although John had already finished composing Prelude No. 2 in A minor when he received this poetry collection, he found that this title seemed so appropriate for the second prelude's bell-like harmonics that he immediately subtitled the second prelude, "Bells in Winter." Eventually subtitles were added to fourteen of the preludes, in part to help the listener stay more engaged while trying to follow a performance of the complete set.

No. 1 in C Major — The first prelude is based on a simple pattern of gently rocking sixteenth-note chords in the right hand while a slowly moving melody is projected with the thumb of the left hand. The music should not be hurried as this prelude is really the springboard from which everything flows.

No. 2 in A Minor [Bells in Winter] — The subtitle is borrowed from a book of poetry by Czeslaw Milosz and aptly describes both the bell-like harmonic created by activating a node on the lowest string of the piano and the sharply attacked chords at the high end of the keyboard.

No. 3 in G Major [Playground Games] — There is a kind of "racing around the merry-go-round" flavour to this music that demands great velocity. The very simple diatonic motive that makes up the theme sounds a bit like the bantering of a child's taunt in its spunkiness.

No. 4 in E Minor — The main building block of this prelude is a descending chromatic scale played in steady note values that works somewhat aggressively against a double-dotted melodic fragment that is more angular in the way it utilizes leaps of Perfect Fifths.

No. 5 in D Major [Linear Reverberations] — Throughout this prelude the left hand holds down a low-note cluster that generates overtones (sympathetic reverberations) to the right hand passages. The linear aspect of the music can be heard in the scalic design of the sustained pitches.

No. 6 in B Minor [Off-beat Waltz] — The use of cross rhythms and syncopated accents gives the music a slightly demonic quality.

No. 7 in A Major — The five-note figure created by expanding a single pitch with its upper and lower neighbour note is one of the most expressive gestures in all of Western Art Music. The underlying building block of this prelude is the chain-like way that this neighbour-note figure is used in the left hand while the right sustains more melodic material. The middle portion of this short prelude requires a fluid sense of rhythmic freedom between hands as the right hand plays triplets while the left hand maintains the quintuple groupings with which the prelude began.

No. 8 in F Sharp Minor — This prelude is perhaps the most minimalistic composition ever written by John Burge in that the work is built entirely around the bass line's repetition of the tonic and dominant pitches while the top voice simply ascends by diatonic steps using a broken-chord pattern. The three-part texture is completed by the addition of a middle voice that simply repeats a four-note motive in whole notes. The music ends with the lower voice's tonic and dominant pattern reactivated by using a stopped string technique inside the piano (an effect that sounds very much like a cello pizzicato).

No. 9 in E Major [The Singing Clock] — The subtitle for this prelude is really an instruction to play the melody as expressively as possible while keeping the accompanimental fabric mechanically exact.

No. 10 in C Sharp Minor — The four-part texture of this prelude is almost orchestral in the way that the part-writing moves expansively across the entire keyboard in loud, forceful strokes.

No. 11 in B Major [The Autoharp] — At just six bars in length, this is the shortest prelude of the set. As all the sounds are created by strumming the strings inside the piano, it is certainly the most evocatively distinctive of the preludes and performers should strive to give the phrases an expressive musical shape.

No. 12 in G Sharp Minor [Das Thema] — This is one of the hardest pieces in the collection, requiring stamina and precision to capture the driving rhythmic energy while always projecting the four-note motive that is heard in virtually every bar. In many ways, Prelude No. 12 is the companion to Prelude No. 24 in that both works are quite unrelenting in their organic expansion of a single idea, culminating in a powerful ending.

No. 13 in F Sharp Major [One-Note Ostinato] — The very simple materials used in Prelude No. 13 give the music a sense of 'freshness' and 'new beginnings'. This quality was intentionally applied by the composer to delineate the location of this prelude as the half-way point in the set. There is a kind of "pop" music feel to the grove that is created by the octave repetitions of the tonic pitch in a 3+3+2 rhythmic grouping. Playing this music with a relaxed right-hand wrist is crucial to avoiding fatigue or a repetitive stress injury.

No. 14 in E Flat Minor — This prelude is a short exploration of the piano as a substitute for a bass drum.

No. 15 in D Flat Major [Polytonality] — By duration, this is the longest Prelude in the set and one of the most expressive. The piece is organized around the juxtaposition of D Flat Major with G Major such that both key signatures are used at the same time, one for each hand. The opening 18-bar theme becomes the basis for a variation-like treatment in the second half of the Prelude.

No. 16 in B Flat Minor [The Hummingbird] — Of all the subtitled preludes, the allusion to the hummingbird is significant in the way that this image inspires a performance of the music that is both fast and fleeting. The broken chord figuration can almost be played as fast as possible, taking just a bit of time at the important cadential moments.

No. 17 in A Flat Major [The Aeolian Harp] — The first etude of Chopin's Opus 25 set of twelve Etudes is also in the key of A Flat Major. Due to the fast broken-chord figuration in both hands, this etude has been given the nickname, "The Aeolian Harp." Burge's Prelude No. 17 is a kind of gloss on the first phrase of this Chopin Etude. Additionally though, Burge incorporates harp-like interruptions played inside the piano between each chord change in an attempt to really underscore the music's harp-like influence.

No. 18 in F Minor — As this was the final prelude composed of the twenty-four, its fast, syncopated character and motivic emphasis on the interval of a falling or rising minor tenth, strongly reflects the desire on the composer's part to include a prelude that is quite different from the others.

No. 19 in E Flat Major [Deadlines] — Somewhat like a scherzo, this prelude is organized around a very fast compound triple meter through which two-handed, interlocking gestures traverse the entire range of the piano. The slight hints of melodic material provide brief moments of calm, as if one is just catching their breathe before rushing along to the next pressing deadline.

No. 20 in C Minor — Like many of the other short preludes in this set, there is a strong procedural element in the overall design of this prelude. The music of Prelude No. 20 is really just one long diminuendo as the chords and melodic material gradually move into higher registers. A layer of rhythmic counterpoint is added to the music in the way that the pianist's left hand taps the same pattern on different parts of the piano.

No. 21 in B Flat Major — This prelude consists of just five expressive phrases that all begin with the same half-diminished seventh chord (B flat-D-E-G). Each phrase is pulled in a different harmonic direction until the last phrase finally shifts towards a B flat major triad at the end. Indeed, the only tonic triad heard in root position in this prelude is found in the last bar.

No. 22 in G Minor — This prelude picks up the same half-diminished seventh sonority that dominates Prelude No. 21, but in Prelude No. 22 it is now treated in a G minor context. Throughout most of this prelude, both hands play the same fast 16th-note passages an octave apart.

No. 23 in F Major [Spring Thaw] — This really is the only prelude of the set that has a clear ABA structure. The outer sections require the pianist to pluck high strings with the right hand while the left hand expands a wedge-like melodic figure. This figure becomes the melodic building block for the more passionately written middle portion of the prelude. In the same way that the second prelude captured a sonic picture of "Bells in Winter," this second-last prelude musically represents the melting of winter into spring. The title, "Spring Thaw," is a tribute to Canadian poet, Margaret Avison, who in her poetry often drew spiritual significance from the changing of the seasons and whose poetry is an oft-used source for John Burge.

No. 24 in D Minor (Le Fini) — Chopin's Preludes end with three, very strongly accented low D's. John Burge shifts this around by *starting* his last prelude with these same three notes. Thereafter, the music

introduces a pattern of alternating chords between hands that steadily increases in intensity as the music modulates through a variety of different keys. The ending is percussively loud, thereby projecting a strong conclusion for not just this prelude, but for the entire set of preludes as well.