

MINSOO SOHN

piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I BWV 846-869

Prelude & Fugue No. 1 in C major

Prelude & Fugue No. 2 in C minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 3 in C# major

Prelude & Fugue No. 4 in C# minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 5 in D major

Prelude & Fugue No. 6 in D minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 7 in E-flat major

Prelude & Fugue No. 8 in E-flat minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 9 in E major

Prelude & Fugue No. 10 in E minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 11 in F major

Prelude & Fugue No. 12 in F minor

INTERMISSION

Prelude & Fugue No. 13 in F# major

Prelude & Fugue No. 14 in F# minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 15 in G major

Prelude & Fugue No. 16 in G minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 17 in A-flat major

Prelude & Fugue No. 18 in G# minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 19 in A major

Prelude & Fugue No. 20 in A minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 21 in B-flat major

Prelude & Fugue No. 22 in B-flat minor

Prelude & Fugue No. 23 in B major

Prelude & Fugue No. 24 in B minor

Johann Sebastian Bach

The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* (WTC) is arguably Bach's best-known work. Its two volumes, published decades apart, are considered amongst the most important works in the history of Western art music.

The title page of Book I, completed in 1722, reads:

The Well-Tempered Keyboard (Clavier), or Preludes and Fugues though all tones and semitones For the profit and use of musical youth desiring instruction, and especially for the pastime of those who are already skilled in this study, composed and prepared by Johann Sebastian Bach.

The work's dual aims of educating the young and engaging the interest of the musically literate have been resoundingly fulfilled, as the WTC is now part of every serious piano student's course of study, while composers from Mozart to Beethoven and from Chopin to Shostakovich have expressed their admiration in many of their own works.¹

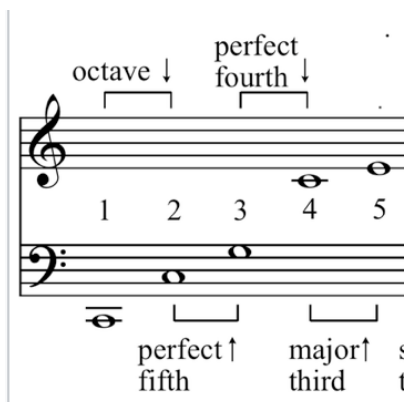
Tuning and Equal Temperament

The issue provocatively raised in the title of the WTC is that of "temperament" (i.e., tuning). The Western system of 12 notes to the octave was arrived at by observing the mathematical relationship between the overtones created by a vibrating object such as a string. Here are the overtones naturally created by a string vibrating on a low C (the black notes being approximations).



¹ Mozart studied the WTC from manuscripts and transcribed eight of the fugues for string quartet (KK. 404 & 405). Beethoven knew the WTC intimately and made a five-part string arrangement of the B-flat minor fugue from WTC I (BWV 867). The influence of Bach is most evident late in Beethoven's career when he turned increasingly to fugue and fugal procedure to intensify the expressive impact of his last piano sonatas and string quartets. Chopin carried an edition of the WTC with him for his stay on the island of Majorca, where in the winter of 1838–39 he composed the majority of his Preludes Op. 28 in all the major and minor keys. And Shostakovich wrote his own set of 24 Preludes & Fugues, premiered by Tatiana Nikolaeva in 1952.

These mathematically exact ratios produce the “just” intervals of an *octave* (2:1), a perfect *5th* (3:2), a perfect *4th* (4:3), a major *3rd* (5:4) etc.



But using this mathematical principle to generate all the pitches of our Western tonal system creates a problem. For example, the pitch “E,” fifth in the overtone series, is *not* the same pitch as the “E” arrived at by calculating four “just” 5ths above the fundamental note “C.” It is out by just a fraction.²

One solution used in the Baroque era was so-called “mean tone” tuning, which slightly flattened the 5ths used when tuning instruments. This served to keep the major and minor 3rds of the most important chords closer to their “just” equivalents.

But this tuning system was effective only in keys with a low number of sharps or flats, and with the gradual expansion of keys being used in 18th-century music, the only viable alternative became the modern system of equal temperament, in which the octave was divided into semitone intervals of equal size — a solution pointed to, and even required, in order to perform Bach’s complete WTC without re-tuning the instrument between pieces.

The Preludes

The preludes and fugues of WTC 1 range widely in compositional style and mood, reflecting Bach’s intention to maximize the collection’s educational value for students and its interest for connoisseurs.

To that end, it contains both newly composed works, specially composed for the collection, and previously composed works that Bach had accumulated in his career up to 1722.

² If we give an arbitrary value of 100 to the fundamental note, then the octave above it (2:1) will be 200; the 5th above that (3:2) will be 300; the 4th above that (4:3) will be 400; and the 3rd above that (5:4) will be an even **500**. Calculating four separate 5ths (C-G-D-A-E) at the ratio of 3:2 to arrive at the same pitch, however, produces $100 \times 1.5 \times 1.5 \times 1.5 \times 1.5 = \mathbf{506.25}$.

Among the previously composed works are 11 preludes that Bach had originally written in 1720 for the *Clavier-Büchlein*, or “Little Keyboard Book,” for the education of his 10-year-old son Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–1784). Many of these are in the style of preludes intended to warm up the player’s fingers.

These “figuration” or “pattern” preludes often feature continuous 16th-note motion elaborating a series of simple harmonic progressions. Typical examples are the Prelude No. 1 in C major (later used by Gounod as the harmonic backdrop to his Ave Maria),



the Prelude No. 2 in C minor,



the Prelude No. 3 in C# major,



the Prelude No. 5 in D major,



and the Prelude in D minor.



Not to mention the bouncy, riotously ebullient Prelude in G major:



And the Prelude in B-flat major almost takes this “finger warm-up” function into virtuoso toccata territory:



Other preludes more resemble Bach’s two- and three-part inventions, with a single thematic element developed in counterpoint with other voices, all of which are dominated by the musical idea presented in the opening bars.

Among the two-part variants of this type, we find the Prelude in F major:



the Prelude in F# major,



the Prelude in F# minor,



and the Prelude in A minor.



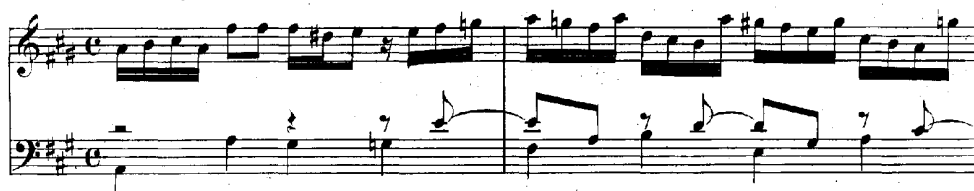
To be listed among the three-part variants of the invention type are the Prelude in E major,



the Prelude in G# minor,



the Prelude in A major,



and the Prelude in B major.



Closer to a modern sensibility are the *arioso* preludes, which put the focus clearly on lyrical melody rather than on the development of musical ideas. These are among the “moodiest” of the preludes in the set, and they include the Prelude in C# minor, which evokes a lone voice at prayer echoing off the stone walls of an empty cathedral.



Similarly “atmospheric” in mood is the Prelude in E-flat minor, described by German musicologist Hermann Keller as “the first nocturne in clavier music, a nocturne with the clarity of a starry night”.



“The strangeness of key,” Keller writes, “gives the prelude an uncommon magic. The effect is strengthened through the solemn 3/2 meter and through the harp-like chords over which a duet of two mutually answering voices rises.”

But most emotionally resonant of all is the orchestrally conceived five-part Prelude in B-flat minor that, with its inexorable march-like rhythm and fateful tonic pedal point, has been compared to the mournful opening of the St. Matthew Passion.



One can only wonder if this prelude was the inspiration for Chopin's famous funeral march in the same minor key.

The Fugues

Fugue, with its arcane formal procedures and densely concentrated discussion of musical ideas, was considered to represent the highest of compositional achievements for composers of the Baroque era. Even after musical fashion had changed by the mid-18th century to favour a lighter, more transparent style of writing, fugue retained its prestige in the 19th century as a display vehicle for intellectual brilliance in the development sections of sonata movements and as an end-weighting anchor of gravitas in the finales of works such as Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A-flat major Op. 110, Schubert's "Wanderer" Fantasy, Brahms' Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel Op. 24 and well into the 20th century in Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata (1951).

It was, and remains, a connoisseur's genre, with terms and concepts you will need to know if you wish to shine at your next dinner party after artfully steering table conversation round to the niceties of fugal design.

Here is a primer:

A fugue is a work of intensely imitative counterpoint in a fixed number of voices (three or four are the most common) based on a recurring melodic pattern known as the **subject**. Its overall structure features **expositions** of this subject (in one or more voices) alternating with **episodes** of a freer, more relaxed character.

The subject is immediately identifiable as the solo voice presented in the opening exposition, unaccompanied. It is then “echoed” in the manner of a round by the same subject in another voice, but not in the same key. This voice “answers” in the dominant (the key five notes up) while the first voice noodles on with a **countersubject**, a melodic counterpoint to the subject, making now two voices in the texture.

The texture expands to three voices when yet another voice chimes in with the subject back in the tonic (the home key) once again, and so on, alternating between tonic and dominant until all the voices have had their say.

At this point the first exposition of the fugue is complete.

Here, for example, is the exposition of the first fugue, the Fugue in C major, from WTC 1, with the four voices entering in the order: alto, soprano, tenor, bass.

FUGA I.

The musical score for Fuga I is presented in two systems. The first system shows the alto voice (labeled 'alto' in red) entering with the subject, followed by the soprano voice (labeled 'soprano' in red) entering with the subject in the dominant. The second system shows the tenor voice (labeled 'tenor' in red) entering with the subject in the tonic, followed by the bass voice (labeled 'bass' in red) entering with the subject in the dominant. The score is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. A measure number '5' is indicated at the beginning of the second system.

A fugue proceeds as an alternation of expositions (those after the first are called **re-expositions**) and intervening episodes, making the overall form:

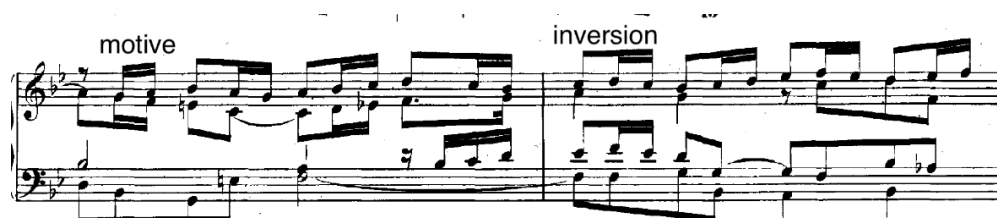
EXPOSITION (episode) RE-EXPOSITION (episode) RE-EXPOSITION, etc.

The episodes, while contrasting in texture, don't lose the melodic thread entirely though, as they often blather on in sequences, repeating small motivic bits derived from the subject, or maybe from one of the countersubjects.

Here is the subject of the Fugue in G minor. Note the little motivic bit at the end.



In the course of the fugue this motive becomes the topic of considerable sequential chatter. In this episode it is first quoted straight from the subject and then in inversion.



Which brings us to the many other contrapuntal “devices” that the fugue composer might seek to apply, including *augmentation*, in which the subject is presented in double note values, or *diminution*, i.e., presented in halved note values.

One very common device is *stretto*, in which the voices don’t wait for each other to finish before chiming in with their own entry, creating an “overlap” texture of echoing subject entries, as in this stretto between alto, tenor and bass from the Fugue in C major:



Confused?

If this seems overly complicated to you, if it seems too confusing and hard to follow, please know that your bewilderment, your astonishment, is the very point of this music.

Bach, you see, who signed all of his manuscripts *Ad majorem Dei gloriam* (To the greater glory of God) was a true believer in the pietist Lutheran faith of his time, which held that the Divine Presence resided in every living thing, that it penetrated into every single object and that it was immanent in every worldly phenomenon that human beings could perceive.

And his music, whether overly secular or devoutly religious, he considered just one of those phenomena. In the dazzling complexity of its imitative structures, he believed he was merely evoking, for those who could hear it, and as *much* as they could hear it, a reflection in sound of the wondrous order to be found in Nature, God's finest creation.

In the end Bach, in his own mind, was simply the Willie Nelson of his time, singing, "What a wonderful world!"

Donald G. Gíslason 2026