

# PROGRAM NOTES

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My first encounter with Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* was Barbra Streisand's *A Christmas Album*, which included Gounod's version of the first Prelude—the "Ave Maria." I was four or five. My father remarked to my mother that it sounded like Barbra was "on coke," which I assumed was soda, and that the Latin pronunciation left something to be desired. And yet I loved it, especially the way Barbra gathered intensity towards the end, riding the waves of her handy backup chorus (it would be nice to have one of those as a solo pianist, from time to time), and then belting out what I later learned in music theory was called a "cadential six-four chord"—it seemed like Bach was a channel for the most incredible, soaring leaps and desires.

Alas, soon enough I came to know the *Well-Tempered Clavier* like all other pianists: as a requirement for auditions, or a qualifying round for competitions. Bach is a great, quick way to judge a pianist's finger independence, structure and dexterity. But this gatekeeper role is a disservice, worse than Gounod's kitsch. It reinforces a pedantic stereotype and creates an aura of fear.

Writing a program note for this landmark of music is like blurbing the Bible. Where do you start? With the vast text or its vast influence? No matter what you say, you're going to get in trouble with someone. And explaining this music involves a lot of lingo: "fugue," "invertible counterpoint," "stretto." Readers who know the jargon will be bored by explanation, and readers who don't will be overwhelmed and turned off.

Perhaps best to start, then, with simple facts: Book One is 24 preludes and fugues, a pair in every major and minor key. To me this procession of pairs suggests the animals filing onto Noah's ark: two of every species, a way to reconstitute musical life, should everything vanish. It was published in 1722, nearly 300 years ago. Its declared purpose was to be a helpful collection of teaching pieces. I'd argue it's the most generous, rhapsodic, genial, heartbreaking set of lessons ever created.

In the classes I remember most fondly from high school and college, my teachers would start with a principle, or an idea: transcendentalism, parabolas, symbolism. Having established the idea, they'd move to examples: for instance, how Wallace Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice Cream" was an allegory for the ephemerality of appearances. The idea acquires a life and a purpose. This pedagogical move—from a principle to its instances, to its consequences and manifestations—is one of the most fundamental acts of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. We begin with a thought, and end with a world. At the opening of each individual piece, you find an idea, an emotion, a gesture, a texture. It is then taken (in the next one-to-three minutes, rarely more) to what you might call a logical conclusion. But sometimes the logical appears wildly illogical: the dogged, repeated, machine-like rhythm of the C minor prelude erupts into a changeable improvisation; what we thought was the melancholy accompaniment of the E minor prelude turns into an obsession for both hands, a near-rage, while the melody vanishes. Often, the consequences dwarf the original idea, like in the C major prelude, where initially framed, demure seventh chords become instruments of unbelievable tension. Ideas are not static; they want to grow.

I suppose there's no avoiding a brief explanation of a fugue. Fugues are an interesting combination of strict and open-ended. Their beginnings are prescribed but their evolutions are not. They start with one voice alone stating a musical idea, which then appears in a second, third or fourth (even fifth) voice. Once all voices have entered, the fugue enters a freer phase. The world is its oyster. The theme may appear in any voice, right side up or upside down or backwards or elongated, or we may slide into an "episode," a temporary reprieve, a contrasting idea. The theme may interrupt and overlap itself too ("stretto"), in a surge of excitement or self-reinforcement. We can move from key to key, draping our idea in a rainbow of colors. The one thing you cannot do is leave the theme altogether, for too long; fugues, like marriages, require a reasonably high percentage of fidelity.

I like to think of fugues as mini lives, beginning with an act of birth: they appear to generate themselves, through spontaneous self-reproduction. After youthful exposition, with the texture complete, they enter middle age. The music acquires a wanderlust: a need to change key, venture forth to unexpected nodes. As a fugue approaches old age, it begins inevitably to retrace its steps: one last emphatic statement, or a thrilling stretto, or a striking or moving arrangement of voices. Bach has great creativity for these sites of return and fulfillment: never quite the same, always adapted to the idea. Sometimes, as in the G major fugue, there is the feeling of a mini apotheosis, reprising the theme like a joyful chorus; sometimes, as in the B minor and F minor fugues, you just hear the same unsettling enigma, one last haunting time.

The main melodies of fugues are called “subjects.” Bach’s subjects are lessons in their own right, and objects for meditation. They teach both construction and catchiness (you might say, virality). To be a good subject, the idea must be able to survive a great deal of repetition but also propel events forward. It must have inevitability, and a clear, vivid identity, so it can be recognized in the middle of all the counterpoint. Last but not least, it must have something to say.

Several of the catchiest *Well-Tempered* fugue subjects feature what I like to call a philosophical two-step: a question, followed by a somewhat unexpected answer. The G minor fugue gives you a stern minor descent, followed by a graceful, even dancing reply. The A minor fugue theme stops in its middle on a savagely dissonant leap, then returns with a flurry of close notes. Within the single subject, you find opposition, dialectic, a seesaw of parts, each food for future thought.

But there are great single-part subjects, too. The five notes of the C# minor fugue subject, for instance, begin and end on the same pitch, with unsettling intervals in between. We depart, but must always return; Bach deploys this fatefulness to incredible effect. The quite different A-flat major fugue simply ascends through the A-flat major chord, finds a beautiful high neighboring note (F), then slips back down to the main chord. That’s it! Its gesture is aspiration, and the message is in part the purity of the harmonies; only one note is dissonant (but not really or darkly dissonant).

Some themes are iconoclasts. The A major fugue begins with a single short note—an obvious joke, as if the piece ends the moment it begins. The E major fugue starts with just a pair of notes, stops short, and then starts running off as if being pursued. The F# minor fugue begins with just a bit of ascending scale; it waits; then it ascends a bit more, and waits; at last, it climbs one more note, and falls. It’s not exactly right to call this a “melody,” so much as a scale performed by a cautious turtle, painfully slow, waiting at each juncture to see what will happen. These pauses leave room for other sighing, falling ideas to intervene as the fugue goes on. Ascents play against descents; musical reflection becomes emotional reflection.

There are verbose subjects, concise subjects, unknowable enigmas, and all-too-obvious dances—like the C minor and C# major. They all make us think about the simplest relationships between notes of the scale, and what those notes might finally mean, in terms of chords—we try to interpret them, while Bach reveals the solutions.

I am in danger of neglecting the Preludes. They are a motley and yet incredibly friendly assortment: virtuoso pieces, melancholy ruminations, studies and curiosities. The first pair, the C major and C minor, are iconic chord studies. They begin with no changes of rhythm, and no overt melody, but a stream of continuous notes. It reminds me of when my mother would take everything off my plate, except for the broccoli. You’re going to listen to the harmony, Bach seems to say, whether you like it or not. But by the last Prelude, the B minor, you are at the opposite pole, with a texture made of three melodies: two duetting, lamenting voices up top, in an endless interweaving of yearning and dissonance, and a walking bass down below—even the harmonies have been melodized.

The Preludes largely explore the joys of the miniature: pieces that are over, almost, before they begin. I am reminded of pieces Schumann composed a hundred and fifteen years later, of fragments that reinvent themselves. In the B-flat Major Prelude, for instance, we begin with the sheer virtuosity of fast notes, a *moto perpetuo*. Halfway through, however, chunky chords bring the manic motion to a halt. From then on, fast fingers and fat chords are in perpetual war. There is a wit to these vast contrasts in small spaces, and also a sense that the moment Bach tires of an

idea, he moves on (a freedom not permitted in a fugue). In his book *Testaments Betrayed*, Milan Kundera describes the pitfalls of big classical pieces and novels as “a collaboration between an eagle and hundreds of heroic spiders spinning webs to cover all the crannies.” He talks about the boring but necessary moments where composers (and writers) have to develop or modulate to get back to the desired outcome. But in these Preludes, it’s all eagles, no spiders—composition as flight.

One of my favorite Preludes is the E major, which begins as a seemingly straightforward pastoral. As Andras Schiff points out, you can hear the shepherd’s pipe, and the “sheep safely graze.” But some measures in, the left hand interjects a flat note, a musical cloud. It is reflected in the right hand, like a cloud is reflected in a lake. With that one gesture, the idyll acquires loss, and the picture takes on depth. The poetic pastoral addresses the play between the beauty of nature and the inevitability of loss and death—and it’s all there, held in suspension in that minute of music, a miniature world. It vanishes, and we go on to the next world.

This Prelude exemplifies one of the *Well-Tempered Clavier’s* most important themes: the complicated doorway between major and minor. It’s important to remind ourselves of the larger sweep of European classical music history. The major/minor classification of musical keys was relatively new. Previously, composers worked in church modes—there were as many as seven—where what we have come to know as major and minor are mixed. By Bach’s juncture in time, common practice has become more condensed, and more polarized (both a gain and a loss, depending on your point of view). Within every prelude and every fugue, Bach allows major and minor to visit each other. We cross and recross the boundary, an act with myriad metaphorical overtones: light meets dark, extrovert becomes introvert, joy gives way to sorrow, et cetera, et cetera. These moments of turning are for me the core of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. They give the feeling of a fabric, reversible, invertible, turned inside out and back like a Möbius strip, an unending emotional richness. It is beautiful that Bach belies the premise of his own masterpiece. On the page he divides the world into major and minor. But in the music, he murmurs to us: no, it’s always both.

—Jeremy Denk, March 2022