

Johann Sebastian Bach
The Well-Tempered Clavier – Book 2, BWV 870-893

Bach gave the title *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* to a book of preludes and fugues in all twenty-four major and minor keys, composed “for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study”. Some twenty years later Bach compiled Book 2, which was intended as a complement to Book 1. It is generally far more difficult than Book 1, with greater technical and structural difficulty for the performer. It was the ultimate work book, open to constant change and refining by Bach himself.

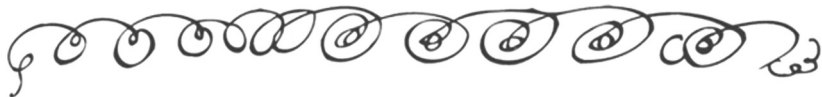
Busoni famously said the first book was for performers and the second for composers. Each set contains 24 pairs of preludes and fugues. The first pair is in C major, the second in C minor, the third in C sharp major, the fourth in C sharp minor, and so on. The rising chromatic pattern continues until every key has been represented, finishing with a B minor fugue. The first set was compiled in 1722 during Bach’s appointment in Köthen; the second followed 20 years later in 1742, while he was in Leipzig. Book 2 was written during a period of Bach’s life when many keyboard works appeared including the *Klavierübungen* Parts 2 and 3, the ‘Goldberg’ Variations of 1741 and the first version of *The Art of Fugue*. As with these other works, it exemplifies Bach’s inexhaustible musical appetite for different styles.

Bach recycled some of the preludes and fugues from earlier sources: the 1720 *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, J. S. B’s son, for instance, contains versions of eleven of the preludes of the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The C sharp major prelude and fugue in Book 1 was originally in C major. Bach’s title suggests that he had written for a (12-note) well-tempered tuning system in which all keys sounded in tune (also known as “circular temperament”). The opposing system in Bach’s day was “meantone temperament” in which keys with many accidentals sound out of tune.

Bach would have been familiar with different tuning systems, and in particular as an organist would have played instruments tuned to a meantone system. It is sometimes assumed that by “well-tempered” Bach intended equal temperament which had been described by theorists and musicians for at least a century before Bach’s birth. Evidence for this may be seen in the fact that in Book 1 Bach paired the E flat minor prelude (six flats) with its enharmonic key of D sharp minor (six sharps) for the fugue. This represents an equation of the most tonally remote enharmonic keys where the flat and sharp arms of the circle of fifths cross each other opposite to C major. Any performance of this pair would have required both of these enharmonic keys to sound identically tuned, thus implying equal temperament in the one pair, as the entire work implies as a whole.

Forkel, Bach’s first biographer, reports that Bach tuned his own instruments and found other people’s tunings unsatisfactory; his own allowed him to play in all keys and to modulate into distant keys almost without the listener noticing it. More recently there has been a series of proposals of temperaments derived from the handwritten

pattern of loops on Bach's 1722 title page. These loops (though truncated by a later clipping of the page) can be seen at the top of the title page of the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, 1722, showing the handwritten loops which some have interpreted as tuning instructions:



Each prelude is followed by a fugue in the same key. In each book the first prelude and fugue is in C major, followed by a prelude and fugue in its parallel minor key C minor. Then all keys, each major key followed by its parallel minor key, are followed through, each time moving up a half tone:

C → C# → D → E♭ → E → F → F# ... → ending with B♭ → B

The two major primary sources for the collection of preludes and fugues in Book 2 are the “London Original” manuscript, dated between 1739 and 1742, with scribes including Bach, his wife Anna Magdalena and his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann, which is the basis for Version A. Version B is the version published by the nineteenth-century Bach-Gesellschaft, a 1744 copy primarily written by Johann Christoph Altnickol (Bach’s son-in-law), with some corrections by Bach himself, and later also by Altnickol and others. Mozart transcribed seven of the fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book 2 for string ensemble showing the influence that this work had on him. Beethoven played the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier* by the time he was 11 and produced an arrangement of BWV 867 no. 22 in B flat minor Book 1, for string quintet.

Hans von Bulow, Liszt’s son in law, called *The Well-Tempered Clavier* the “Old Testament” where Beethoven’s sonatas were the “New Testament”. Bach’s example also inspired numerous composers of the nineteenth century, like Chopin and Shostakovich.

Musically, the structural regularities of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* encompass an extraordinarily wide range of styles, more so than most pieces. The preludes are formally free, although many of them exhibit typical Baroque melodic forms, often coupled to an extended free coda. The preludes are also notable for their odd or irregular numbers of measures, in terms of both the phrases and the total number of measures in a given prelude.

Each fugue is marked with the number of voices, three or four only in Book 2. There are ten binary movements among the preludes (double bar in the middle, with repeats and written in the new “sonata form”) which is the most obvious innovation in Book 2, though “sonata” here is close to Scarlatti’s conception, not Mozart’s. This gives the preludes much greater size and stature on average than they had in Book 1. Book 2 shows very clearly

Bach's integration of European styles, in particular between the Italian tradition for display and French dance forms that we see also in the partitas.

It is interesting to note Rosalyn Tureck's observation that Bach writes in his own ornamentation for Book 2 whereas the ornamentation for Book 1 was left to the artist's discretion, much to Bach's dissatisfaction.

1. Prelude and fugue a 3 in C major BWV 870 - The prelude is full of the double meanings obtainable by holding the notes of a melody so that they grow into sustained chords. The answer to the fugue subject is accompanied by a counterpoint which continues the same figures and is occasionally reproduced in the same position.

2. Prelude and fugue a 4 in C minor BWV 871 - A flowing binary prelude followed by a four-part fugue that develops for two thirds of its content as a three-part fugue.

3. Prelude and fugue a 3 in C sharp major BWV 872 - A gentle flowing prelude with its own fughetta attached in the 3/8 section. It is interesting to note an earlier version of the prelude, in C major, is given by one of Bach's sons - J.C.F. Bach - where it is written in arpeggiando chords. The fugue subject is exposed in a brilliant stretto with inversion in the third voice.

4. Prelude and fugue a 3 in C sharp minor BWV 873 - This prelude is a trio in the style of a great slow movement in a piece of chamber music. A fugue in continual movement follows, the subject given out in a three-part exposition.

5. Prelude and fugue a 4 in D major BWV 874 - The prelude is marked by asymmetry in rhythm. The tranquil four-voice fugue has subject entries in the order tenor, alto, soprano and bass. The third and fourth entries overlap in stretto.

6. Prelude and fugue a 3 in D minor BWV 875 - The prelude is a brilliant two-voice composition followed by a flowing three-part fugue. The countersubject provides an especially fine contrast to the subject.

7. Prelude and fugue a 4 in E flat major BWV 876 - The use of the appoggiatura adds to the lyrical nature of the prelude coupled with an alla breve fugue in four voices, entering in ascending order. It is the purest vocal writing, but for the extreme height of the soprano entry and a couple of extreme bass notes could easily be sung by a chorus.

8. Prelude and fugue a 4 in D sharp minor BWV 877 (enharmonic of E flat minor) - A prelude in two-voice texture in the manner of a two-part invention, leading to a four-voice fugue, with a counter-subject of initial importance accompanying the second entry.

9. Prelude and fugue a 4 in E major BWV 878 - The subtly sustained notes of the opening of the Prelude in E major provide a clear harmonic pattern. The alla breve four-voice fugue, with entries in ascending order, makes considerable use of stretto.

10. Prelude and fugue a 3 in E minor BWV 879 - The prelude is a two-part invention. Its three-voice fugue, with entries in descending order, has a subject of contrasted rhythms and ends in imposing style.

11. Prelude and fugue a 3 in F major BWV 880 - The prelude is of some complexity, as voice is added to voice in a five-part texture. To this the three-voice fugue, with entries in descending order, provides a lighter contrast.

12. Prelude and fugue a 3 in F minor BWV 881 - There is an almost rhetorical air about this beautiful prelude, coupled with a lively three-voice fugue, with voices entering in descending order.

13. Prelude and fugue a 3 in F sharp major BWV 882 - The prelude opens with an upper voice melody, using rhythmic figures that reappear throughout the movement. The dance-like three-voice fugue brings an important counter-subject accompanying the second and third entries.

14. Prelude and fugue a 3 in F sharp minor BWV 883 - This prelude is a solemn piece with an upper part melody of rhythmic variety. The three-voice fugue has further subject material in two other places. As the fugue develops, these three subjects combine.

15. Prelude and fugue a 3 in G BWV 884 - This prelude has a simpler texture, with a slighter three-voice fughetta in which voices enter in descending order with the arpeggios of the subject.

16. Prelude and fugue in G minor BWV 885 - The indication of "Largo" is Bach's own, using the dotted rhythms of the opening of a French overture, followed by a majestic four-voice fugue

17. Prelude and fugue a 4 in A flat major BWV 886 - This prelude allows emphasis on the tonic chord and the subdominant in its opening bars, using figuration that has a later part to play in the texture. The four-part fugue with its countersubject is a series of descending chromatic notes. It is one of the greatest of the '48' and was first conceived as a fughetta in F ending at bar 24.

18. Prelude and fugue a 3 in G sharp minor BWV 887 - The enharmonic of A flat includes, unusually, contrasting dynamic markings by Bach and slurs on the quavers suggesting something of the dramatic rhetoric of the new age. A three-voice mellifluous double fugue follows in which there is later a chromatically descending

subject, introduced in all three voices and later combined with the original subject.

19. Prelude and fugue a 3 in A major BWV 888 - A gently pastoral three-part prelude followed by a flowing fugue contrasting the rhythm of the subject with an accompanying dotted rhythm.

20. Prelude and fugue a 3 in A minor BWV 889 - A prelude written in double counterpoint with a similar chromatic figure as in the D minor fugue Bk. 2 n. 6. A majestically rhythmic fugue where the faster notes of the counter-subject assume importance as the fugue proceeds.

21. Prelude and fugue a 3 in B flat major BWV 890 - A three-voice texture of the prelude with the crossing of parts and hands that is a feature of the writing. The subject of the fugue is in quavers with a suggestion of appoggiaturas in its second half. Two other thematic elements appear, based in both cases on the ascending scale and these combine with the subject at their first appearance and in the conclusion of the fugue.

22. Prelude and fugue a 4 in B flat minor BWV 891 - The prelude begins with a melody in the middle part of a three-voice texture, aided by the entry of the third, upper part. In the fugue the later entries are accompanied by a strongly characterised ascending chromatic counter-subject. The subject lends itself to the use of overlapping entries in stretto, either closely juxtaposed or more widely spaced apart.

23. Prelude and fugue a 4 in B major BWV 892 - A toccata type prelude is coupled with a long four-voice fugue, with one of the harmonically richest and most original counter subjects Bach ever wrote.

24. Prelude and fugue a 3 in B minor BWV 893 - The prelude has the structure of a two-part invention, the lower part providing an imitation of the upper in a repetition of the subject at the octave, with later entries in related keys. The alto is entrusted with the first statement of the fugal subject, in what is perhaps the most sonorous three-part piece ever written for any less instrument than the organ. The counter-subject includes a passing imitation of the subject itself, which appears in stretto. A second subject is introduced by the bass in accompaniment to the second entry of the subject, and is thereafter used as an accompaniment to the subject.

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