

J.S. BACH - WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER 1

For more than two centuries Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier has had a distinct status in our musical cultural heritage. No other composition has been so prevalent in reaching the performing musician, listener, theoretician and composer, even outranking the Goldberg Variations and the Inventions and Sinfonias. The Well-Tempered Clavier has virtually never been absent from the podium or the music room. Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Bruckner and Brahms were all intimately familiar with this music!

Not only the repeated set combination of a prelude and fugue, but also the added fact that Bach moves step by step through all the twelve major and minor keys, and does not for one moment give the impression, that it is an ingenious study piece of the composer or for the performing musician: the Well-Tempered Clavier has provided a function as an outstanding example.

“Das Wohltemperirte Clavier.
oder
Praeludia, und
Fugen durch alle *Tone* und *Semitonia*,
So wohl *tertiam majoram* oder *Ut Re Mi* anlan-
gend, als auch *tertiam minorem* oder *Re*
Mi Fa betreffend. Zum
Nutzen und Gebrauch der Lehr-begierigen
Musicalischen Jugend, als auch dere in diesem *stu-*
dio schon *habil* seyenden besonderem
ZeitVertreib auffgesetzt
und verfertigt von
Johann Sebastian Bach.
p.t.: HochFürstlich Anhalt-
Cöthenschen Capel-
Meistern und *Di-*
rectore derer
Cammer *Mu-*
siquen.
Anno
1722”

Although the title page of the first book of the Well-Tempered Clavier – a similar second book would appear later – indicates the year 1722, after Bach's death a story did the rounds for a long time that he had written the whole volume out of sheer boredom because of the lack of a clavichord (in Weimar or Carlsbad). It was generally accepted that Bach, in earlier and later periods often used existing works as a basis for supplementation, developments and adaptations.

This is proved in the comparison of the eleven preludes of the *Klavierbüchlein* of his son Wilhelm Friedemann, which he wrote in about 1720, with practically the same preludes in the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. It is not inconceivable that Bach toyed with the idea of producing a cycle of preludes and fugues much earlier before he had moved to Köthen in 1717. Similar collections were not unknown in the first decades of the eighteenth century. In this way, in 1702, J.K.F. Fischer compiled twenty preludes and fugues in all keys (except D flat, b flat, e flat, F sharp and g sharp) entitled *Ariadne Musica Neo-Organoedum*. Also Mattheson presented a study book in 1719 in which all the twenty-four keys were represented.

Whoever compares Bach's music with the above mentioned volumes experiences nevertheless the same feeling of euphoria as someone who has studied the études of Czerny for years and suddenly undertakes those of Chopin. Bach knew how to combine the technical study of clavier playing with the theoretical knowledge of composition, and that above all to surpass this by creating a musicality which anyone 'Lehr-begierig' could not resist. The rich diversity of the preludes alone - with their improvised intonations fundamental for the complex contrapuntal exercises which follow - is striking. Scores of practical techniques present themselves: broken chords, pendulum figures, toccata-like virtuosities, arias, sometimes pure and clear, sometimes complex and well devised. The three- to five-part fugues which follow are not less diverse and are sometimes recognised thematically from the preceding connected prelude.

This diversity is closely linked to the tonalities which Bach employed. Until about 1725, one searched for ways of abandoning the 'inaccuracies' of Pythagorean tuning (by tuning in perfect fifths whereby after several octaves the tones move further apart) and the 'inaccuracies' frequently used in the sixteenth and seventeenth century as a 'compromise tuning' such as the mean-tone temperament (in which the major third, specifically, is tuned as accurately as the minor third whereby as a result the e flat in c-e flat has a different pitch to the d sharp in b-d sharp). Modulation between keys far apart was impossible because of the (enharmonic) differences of e flat and d sharp or a flat and g sharp. It was also impossible to play in e-flat minor or F-sharp major for example.

Through equal or proportionally equal temperament, whereby all the fifths are tuned a little too flat, the major thirds flattened and the minor thirds sharpened, it is possible to modulate effortlessly from one key to another. All intervals are of course somewhat out of tune, but so evenly that it is not disturbing (nowadays we are so accustomed to it that hardly anyone notices anymore!). Although the different keys have basically lost their original characters in the equal temperament, it would seem that Bach could not quite dissociate himself from it. A classical C major is placed opposite a more pastoral F major, a bright A major opposite a more passionate g minor or a poetic e flat minor. Bach indicates major (ut-re-mi) in contrast to the minor (re-mi-fa).

To conclude: which instrument has Bach written his *Well-Tempered Clavier* for? The title of this volume is not explanatory. Every keyboard instrument suffices – organ,

harpsichord or piano. However, in all plausibility, Bach probably wrote it for his harpsichord. The delicate instrument with a limited range on which a light vibration can be made by direct finger contact via the hammer with the string. For composing house-fathers with large families it is an extremely suitable instrument for writing music in peace and allowing children eager to learn, to practice undisturbed. A keyboard with a headphone....

Who would not like to listen to such perfect beautiful music? Also on the modern concert grand, the modern pianoforte which has served as an excellent advocate for Bach's clavier works for more than two centuries.

Leo Samama, 1999

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