

## **J.S. BACH - DAS WOHLTEMPERIERTE KLAVIER 2**

Ever since the first appearance of the forty-eight preludes and fugues, which together have become known as The Well-Tempered Clavier, these compositions have been canonised. During a period of more than a quarter of a century, Bach's sons based their learning of the rudiments of music on them. They passed this on to their pupils. Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms and untold other known and unknown composers, pianists and music lovers (in the widest sense of the word) have worked their way through these so musically varied and technically diverse 48 preludes and fugues in all the major and minor keys.

In 1782, Mozart regularly visited the home in Vienna of Baron van Swieten, who was an eminent authority and admirer of Bach's music and that of his oldest sons. Wolfgang became so infatuated with the preludes and fugues of Johann Sebastian Bach, that he arranged three fugues for string trio (KV 404a) and at about the same time another five fugues for string quartet (KV 405) out of The Well-Tempered Clavier. The majority of them stemmed from the second book.

A year later, in 1783, Beethoven, then aged twelve was praised as a child prodigy with the words: ".....to put it in a nutshell, he plays the greatest part of The Well-Tempered Clavier of Sebastian Bach ....". Years later he himself remarked; *"Immer, wenn ich beim Komponieren ins Stocken geriet, nahm ich mir das Wohltemperierte Klavier hervor, und sogleich sprossen mir wieder neue Ideen"*. Also the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, a pupil of Liszt, wrote: *"Wenn alle Meisterwerke der Musik verloren gingen und nur das Wohltempierte Klavier uns erhalten bliebe, so könnte man daraus die ganze Literatur wieder neu konstruieren."*

In contrast to the first part of The Well-Tempered Clavier, the second part has not evolved as a work on its own. The year of its origin had long been accepted as 1744 as indicated in a handwritten copy of Bach's pupil and son-in-law Johann Christoph Altnickol (1719-1759) made in 1755. The title page made by Altnickol is less flowery than Bach's own page of the first book. His status had greatly improved meanwhile, from court composer in Cöthen to "composer to the Royal court of Poland and to the court of the Elector of Saxony, concert master and music director of choirs and musicians in Leipzig". Bach had become so famous in the meantime that no musician or music lover visiting Leipzig would leave without paying his respects to the Thomas cantor.

### **Des Wohltemperierten Claviers**

#### **Zweiter Teil**

bestehend

in

#### **Preludien und Fugen**

durch

alle

#### **Tone und Semitonien**

verfertigt

von

**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
Königlich Pohlnisch und Churfürstl. Sächs.  
Hoff Compositeur Capellmeister  
und Directore Chori Musici  
In Leipzig.

It was not until 1896 that the manuscript, long presumed lost, emerged from a private source to be acquired by the British Museum. The title page however was missing. But based on the research done on the handwriting, one believes now that the manuscript that Bach had compiled together with his wife, Anna Magdalena, can be retraced to just before 1740. Research based on the music itself places it even earlier and in some cases before the origin of the first book of The Well-Tempered Clavier.

All in all, it appeared as if Bach had decided to compile a second volume, following the success of the first, nearly two decades later. Maybe he was inspired by a younger generation of children, namely those of his second wife, who, however young they were, should also be schooled in music. For this second volume he has partly made use of a number of already completed or partly completed preludes and fugues. The earlier ones closely resemble the preludes and fugues from the first volume, whereas the later ones, especially their preludes already point to (for that time) a more contemporary way of composing such as Scarlatti did in his many Essercisi for harpsichord.

In any case in these later preludes an obvious division is recognised whereby the basic principle of the development, i.e. the harmonic modulation, already precedes that of the slightly later classical sonata. Bach had already used this in his concerts in Cöthen, but they were general works of a type different to the more "educational" preludes and fugues. Sometimes Bach played secondary themes in these "modern" preludes in which the density of the earlier preludes based on *ricercare* was lessened. A good example of this is the Prelude in F minor.

Nowadays one believes that the Preludes and Fugues in C major, C sharp major, D minor and G major together with the Fugues in C minor, E flat major and A flat major were completed much earlier. But even after Bach had finished the series and the final draft was completed, he continued to work on some compositions. We know different versions of the Preludes in C major and C sharp minor and the Fugue in A flat major, which have been found in the different hand-written copies made after Altnickol (and which above all clearly indicate the exceptional popularity of Bach's preludes and fugues).

The second book of The Well Tempered Clavier is as full of as many musical gems as the first. In a grand style (in C major) or more intimate (in C sharp major or F sharp minor), classical (in C minor) or French baroque (in G minor), wonderfully chromatic (in A minor) or simple and straightforward (in G major). The three-part and four-part fugues are once again, composed in an utterly ingenious way, sometimes strong and complex (such as the one in E major), sometimes more lyrical with brief tranquil passages (for example the one in G minor).

The playing technique is also varied. Some preludes and fugues are definitely simple to play whereas others are positively difficult. Bach has written another masterpiece in his second series of the Well-Tempered Clavier. It provides a source for the youth who are eager to learn and a special way to while away time for those who have already mastered a sufficient level in playing technique and composing skill, just as Bach had written on the title page of the first book.

Leo Samama, 2003

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