

## ON BACH'S WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER

### BOOK 1: THE ARCHETYPAL CYCLE

Bach's collection of twenty-four preludes and fugues from 1722 constitutes the first truly persuasive application of a keyboard tuning with all the major and minor keys accessible. The poetic range and compositional perfection of this *demonstration* provided a powerful advocacy for a richly extended harmonic language, its influence palpable beyond the times of Wagner and Brahms. Clearly standing at a pivotal point in European music it has the feel of a summation but also of an exciting beginning. It sets a new gold standard for the cycle in instrumental music: enshrined in it, once and for all, are the values of variety, complexity, density of thinking, and coherence that are the hallmarks of the 'great works'. A multitude of references abound, no genre or style, no keyboard instrument or ensemble grouping not recalled – and examined – in some sense or other. The contrapuntal technique appears daunting at first, but closer study reveals a Bach that is often less systematic than popularly supposed. Greater intimacy with the music is rewarded with the revelation of an unpredictable inventive spirit, a love of serendipity, a highly idiosyncratic, at times even bizarre imagination, an effortless symbiosis of stricture and freedom more intriguing than any absolutes.

The sheer extent of Bach's intentions is shown on the opening and closing pages of the book, the transparency and brevity of the C major prelude worlds apart from the gravitas and complex working-out of the B minor fugue, the chromatic subject (including all twelve semitones) of the latter the starkest possible contrast to the limpid white-key arpeggiations at the outset of the book. A kind of Mona Lisa in music, the mystique of this first prelude rests not least on the persistent temptation to 'explain away' its elusive beauty in mundane terms. Are these simple broken chords but improvisatory testing of the new tuning? The reception of the work as 'important' easily skews readings towards a

joyless, generic monumentalising. But high and low and large and small here sit side by side in often problematic and challenging ways, demanding from performer and listener alike an active engagement with *specifics* of thought and feeling.

The broken chords of the first prelude – a highly idiomatic keyboard texture – find their complement in the rising scale – also neatly fitting under the hand – of the succeeding fugue subject. This step-wise ascent is of course also a vocal archetype, and Bach develops the initial cantabile into a sense of 'community', even of fervour, with the successive *stretti*. It is indeed one of the outstanding traits of Bach's fugal writing that subdued aspects of a subject may come to the fore as an argument unfolds, or that contrasting characterisations of the same subject may themselves become the driving force behind a narrative. (Thus rules for replicating articulations of a subject throughout, or for consistently high-lighting the theme/subject through stratified voicings are no more than didactic residue.)

The hushed figures that surround the cantus firmus subject of the F minor fugue speak of a different kind of fervour from that of the C major fugue. A pianist may here build a darkly impressive edifice, relishing the somewhat wayward, nevertheless compelling capability of the piano to sustain extremely long gradual crescendi. But, over-viewing the entire book (that is, as a study in variety-for-the-sake-of-variety in the highest sense), illuminating possibilities are uncovered when *resisting* a treatment of all the bigger fugues as climactic statements. The D-sharp minor fugue, when read as a type of liturgical intimation, is a case in point, the learned contrapuntal devices of this *ricercar* eventually distilling the theme into luminous augmentations. By contrast, in the C-sharp minor fugue any *stile antico* or mannerist origins are completely subsumed by its emotional sweep; and in the case of the E-flat major prelude, by a wonderful opulence. What performer can abstain from physical realisation of the grandeur of these works?

The long fugue in A minor is another instance where gargantuan dimensions may be realised with a certain recklessness. Glenn Gould describes this schematic and dogged essay in typical fashion as being

one of Bach's "celebrated contrapuntal obstacle courses". But with the famous B-flat minor prelude and fugue neither the monumental nor the intimate is set in unambiguous relief. David Ledbetter points out that the fascination in this type of fugue lies not so much in the drama of the entries as the "constant, free and fluid development of the living motivic contrapuntal tissue". He also points out the various pre-Beethovenian interpretations of the upward leap of a minor ninth that features in the fugue subject: wisdom, but also madness, despair, distress. But impossible not to recall (albeit anachronistically) its use as an ultimate *cris du coeur* in Bruckner's Ninth Symphony adagio...

Several of the advanced major-key preludes suggest clavichord or spinet-like timbres (cf. A, E, B and F-sharp) with tone-colours modulated in the most subtle way. And in the fugues in A-flat major and B major, with their rapt elisions of phrases something of the deep harmoniousness of some later fugues in Book 2 of The Well-Tempered Clavier is prefigured. Does the player here take recourse to the picturesque imitation baroque keyboard instruments – or to post-Chopinesque 'pianistic' mores?

The pedagogical use of the work has led to a certain amount of cherry-picking, and consequently to a fossilisation in the way in which some of the more popular pieces are heard. Bach's talent for elevating and complicating the musical ambitions of simple instruction material is in fact beautifully evident in some of these very pieces. Eleven of the first twelve preludes (that in E-flat the exception) appear in the Clavierbüchlein for Bach's son Wilhelm Friedemann, several of them in much simpler guises. His reworkings include adding cadenza-like flourishes to the final bars of the C minor and D major preludes – to brilliant rhetorical effect. For the prelude in C-sharp major an effective Rameau-like *batterie* is worked over a much-extended dominant bass, producing a coup of virtuosity, while for that in D minor the tactile patterns at the opening is allowed to evolve in an uncanny play of free association. The new presto section at the end of the E-minor prelude forms a masterly transition to the nature of the argumentative fugue while continuing the left-hand pattern of the opening part. It is the spinning-out of the top voice into a searing cantabile of its slow opening

section that is, however, the most spectacular of the additions. Suggestive of Bach's own cantata music, a latent sense of profound drama permeates this pristine sound world.

It is often easy to hear where the music plays with hybrid forms or textural stock-in-trades: the A-flat major prelude, for instance, a sonata-allegro with strings (in spite of its flat key); the glorious brilliance of the 'figuration' prelude in G major spilling over into its concertante fugue. At other times it is more difficult, even fruitless, to try to categorise a gesture or a shape or a style of delivery, often so when tracing dance ancestries: the F major fugue may well be a courtly *passepied*, but, as with the C-sharp minor prelude (a French *courante*?), it is no use seeking a niche for the prelude in E-flat minor as an ornate sonata-sarabande, or that in F minor as a slow sonata-allemande, the sum so much greater than the parts in these pieces. Dance rhythms, at times much fetishised in performance practice debates, present a special challenge to the performer: we may well take into account that the mature Bach rarely invokes dance elements without deploying them in unusual, often quite unidiomatic ways; taking the gestural and textural implications of stock-in-trade dances at face value is only a first step for the performer. Workman-like, Bach remains a tireless collector and rethinker of ideas and inventions, all the while, without a trace of cynicism, striving for an absolutely comprehensive art – Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog and fox in equal measure!

In the minds of those interpreters who, either as listeners or players, wish to 'ingest' the work, its rich tapestry may be gradually overlaid by – in some cases even become indistinguishable from – the richness of thoughts and feelings of those, present and past, who have also contemplated it, and through whom we have come to know it: at once a burden and a spur to creativity; for the pianist raising the stakes for confronting his own attitude to history. One may broadly survey the simple sincerity and high art of an Edwin Fischer or the deep convictions of a Samuil Feinberg, the energetic revolt against tradition (or perverse posturing?) of a Glenn Gould, the sheer acts of will of a Sviatoslav Richter, the various textural and gestural lessons that may be gleaned from performances on the range of historical instruments, or the

more or less recent tendency towards digital clarity and micro-shaping and away from that which we may call persuasive 'spontaneous' utterance. It is a measure of the greatness of Bach's score that it can still even at this late stage, 'speak directly' to so many – and can hint at, or at least make us long for, the recovery of some kind of poetic innocence.

## **BOOK 2: A LABOUR OF LOVE**

In Thomas Mann's novel *Lotte in Weimar* an old Goethe muses on the achievements of his youth and of his maturity – the former the work of "genius", the latter the work of "greatness". Such thoughts perhaps passed through Bach's mind too when surveying his own keyboard output, and the profound differences in sensibility that distinguish the second volume of the Well-Tempered Clavier from the first – the two collections more than twenty years apart: while Book 1 exudes the confidence of a man who surveys all, Book 2 adopts the searching manner of a man who has surveyed all for a long time.

One of the most telling differences between the books is to be found in the aspirations evident in the fugues that conclude their two halves. The twelfth and twenty-fourth fugues of Book 1 are grandiose contrapuntal masterpieces on two of Bach's most impressive chromatic subjects; in Book 2 they are middle-scale dance fugues. But closer consideration of the concluding piece of Book 2 is especially revealing: is it with a "mood of utmost good humour" that Bach brings to an end this ne plus ultra of the keyboard literature, as Rosalyn Tureck asserts? Surely this is not the pleasing French dance music of the B minor orchestral suite – the carefully timed chromatic inflections are too suggestive, discomfiting, the elaborations of the subject in the final phrase too poignant a farewell. In elegant environs, expectations are upset with a pained retrospective tinge. Indeed, it is one of the fundamental principles in Book 2 to charm the ear through the airiness and ease of the popular *stile galant*, the profundity of the contrapuntal mastery thus appearing more accessible – and expressive ambiguities more palatable.

The B minor fugue of Book 2 refers us back both to the F major fugue of Book 1 (which also draws on the rhythm of the *passepied*), and to the monumental final work in that volume (with which it shares a key signature), and sets there a fresh set of associations, both for the dance and for the key of B minor. It in no way replaces the intentions of Book 1, nor does it constitute a neat complement. Thus it is characteristic of Bach's musical quest that the new should stand alongside the old in his own oeuvre. Nevertheless, the second book demonstrates in many instances ever-more complicated, and more artfully hidden, origins – not only of individual works, but of tracts of thought, of expressive currents and of turns of phrase. Often what finally evolves stands isolated, uncanny and strange, striving as it were to betray its own genesis. This of course resonates powerfully with 19th century notions of individual genius – where the only true unifying principle is the power of a creative personality.

The consciously harnessed progressive didactic aims of the opening pieces of Book 1 find no recognisable counterpart in Book 2. From the outset the attention is captured by a lived-in sensuousness and complex poetic intentions. The successive documented guises of the opening prelude (its origins going back as far as 1719) reveal Bach developing an archaic organ preambulum into an aching invocation of the muse, tightening the voice-leading and tweaking harmonies on each revisiting. Amazingly its inclusion represents second thoughts, Prelude no. 3 initially standing at the head of the collection. Through transposing *this* piece finally to C-sharp its distinctive profile is enhanced with key-associations of the strange and magical, brilliantly carried over into the fugue with its air of sleight-of-hand.

The opening fugue with its running semiquavers invokes the idea of 'flight'. While divergent readings are certainly possible, a performer ignores the chronological proximity of the Goldberg Variations, with its total embrace of keyboard virtuosity, at his own peril: fleetness of touch is entirely in keeping with the manner and preoccupations of late Bach, but more importantly, serves to clarify the 'goals' of more involved arguments, relieving the ear even as local clarity may be sacrificed momentarily. In keeping with the spirit of diversity a layer of

moderation is inappropriate where the call is clearly for brilliance – when indeed there *are* pieces elsewhere where moderation forms part of the expressive tenor. At any rate, the C-sharp minor fugue with its Couperin-inspired lightness, the D major prelude with its opulent one-in-a-bar, the roguish dash of the A minor fugue, the tautness of the G minor fugue – these present unique technical challenges.

Contrasting sharply, those ruminating preludes where the writing resembles two-part inventions (cf. D-sharp minor, E minor, G-sharp minor, A minor, B minor), and all the mellifluous longer preludes (cf. C-sharp minor, F minor, F-sharp minor, E major, B-flat major) each needs to be distinctively etched. The very long stretches of lucid linear writing in Book 2 (often with a striking cantabile in the top part) and, unlike in Book 1, the almost total absence of brief vignettes (even the shorter pieces being, more or less, thoroughly considered essays) seem to call, not least, for the player's profound engagement with possibilities of colouristic shading at his chosen instrument to illuminate unfolding landscapes, the 'reduction of means' in some schools of Bach-playing, presumably in the service of conjuring some imagined historical artefact, rendering some of the most life-enhancing expressive pathways inaccessible.

By 1744 Bach's desire to 'include everything' in his major collections was as great as ever – to subject even the less-than-elevated to his transforming scrutiny and skill. The rather straight-forward, quasi-improvised C minor fugue for instance, is lifted above the relatively quotidian by a very effective, harmonically pungent stretto at the end. The more challenging attainments are put in relaxed relief, providing another point of access for listener and performer alike. Thus both the F major and E major preludes essay four-bar sarabande-like phrases and a style of moto perpetuo figuration with harmonically significant tied notes (*stile brisé*), but the E major with the easily tangible symmetry of its two halves and *au point* touch proves a moment of repose, whereas the F major with its continual elisions and ambitious paragraph-lengths, each of its main cadences deeply telling, stands among the most charismatic works in the set. With the F-sharp major and A-flat major preludes appearances prove deceiving. The presence of dotted rhythms

here, especially in a 3/4 context, do not necessarily indicate grandiloquence *alla Francese*. Miracles of richness achieved within the great transparency of their ritornello frameworks and two-part textures, a laboured reading would detract from the essential tenderness of these works.

On occasion Bach revisits Book 1 with second thoughts and the ripeness of an Old Master. A comparison of the limpid pastoral E major prelude in Book 1 with the chiaroscuro of the A major of Book 2 is instructive, notably in their sub-dominant reprises and chorale prelude endings. And the rigorous lining up of *stretti* in the A minor fugue of Book 1 is recast in freer form in the B-flat minor of Book 2 to overwhelming, vertiginous effect – now with stridently chromatic counter-ideas and episodic material that propel forward an uncompromising argument. Indeed, the advanced minor-key fugues provide the most thought-provoking layer of writing in Book 2. The three disparate elements of that in F-sharp minor are each superbly worked, but fail to fully reconcile on the final page, exhaustedly coming to rest on a bleak open octave – one of the enigmas of the set. The three voices of the G-sharp minor fugue seem to converge and diverge with a disembodied freedom, translucent and hypnotic; the work's credentials as a fugue on two subjects, combined in its final section, feels incidental. But it is in the D-sharp minor fugue that one gains the most moving sense of device and skill falling away from the surface, where every motivic detail seems liberated, manipulable and meaningful in itself. This strange sound world is one of the more 'modern' creations of Book 2. Such freedom of expression becomes indistinguishable from freedom of craft, and as such the outcome not least of Bach's life-long pre-occupation with the techniques of his proud *stile antico* past (as borne out by Art of Fugue and A Musical Offering too). In this spirit the E major fugue provocatively frames the old stylised ecstatic with the most firmly Lutheran of final cadences and the B major fugue can yearningly herald its end-thoughts: looking back with knowing allegiance to the past, but devoid of austerity.

The image that Laurence Dreyfus develops of Bach as a critic not only of his colleagues but of the intellectual spirit of his age becomes a resonant



one for performer and listener too: re-assessing, re-interpreting, re-applying attainments from the past for Bach always at the heart of technical command *and* depth of feeling; the new-fangled suggesting fresh means by which to grapple with timeless questions, not state-of-the-art practice for garnering applause. Book 2 of the Well-Tempered Clavier is, in the musician's library, happily bestowed a canonic position yet not so readily familiar to a large audience; neither does it enjoy the cult status of the Goldberg Variations or Art of Fugue. In other words, it resists the Bach consumerist's needs in a way which renders each reading more a kind of personal manifesto of the performer than a likely success. On the one hand the challenge is to clarify, to make intelligible to those not in the know; on the other to lose one's self on those mysterious pathways where only a deep familiarity – and affection – can lead. Perhaps most abiding is the awe-inspiring image of Bach playing the preludes and fugues at home to his pupil Heinrich Gerber "altogether three times through": a reminder that these wondrous pieces will always be best savoured as private possessions.

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2013