



**Johann Sebastian Bach** 1685–1750

**The Well-Tempered Clavier I** BWV 846–853

Das Wohltemperierte Clavier I · Le Clavier bien tempéré I

**Prelude & Fugue No. 1 in C major** BWV 846

C-Dur · en *ut* majeur

<div>1</div> Praeludium	2:22
<div>2</div> Fuga	1:55

**Prelude & Fugue No. 2 in C minor** BWV 847

c-Moll · en *ut* mineur

<div>3</div> Praeludium	2:08
<div>4</div> Fuga	1:35

**Prelude & Fugue No. 3 in C-sharp major** BWV 848

Cis-Dur · en *ut* dièse majeur

<div>5</div> Praeludium	1:05
<div>6</div> Fuga	2:02

**Prelude & Fugue No. 4 in C-sharp minor** BWV 849

cis-Moll · en *ut* dièse mineur

<div>7</div> Praeludium	2:41
<div>8</div> Fuga	3:06

**Prelude & Fugue No. 5 in D major** BWV 850

D-Dur · en *ré* majeur

<div>9</div> Praeludium	1:06
<div>10</div> Fuga	1:40

**Prelude & Fugue No. 6 in D minor** BWV 851

d-Moll · en *ré* mineur

<div>11</div> Praeludium	1:20
<div>12</div> Fuga	1:42

**Prelude & Fugue No. 7 in E-flat major** BWV 852

Es-Dur · en *mi* bémol majeur

<div>13</div> Praeludium	4:13
<div>14</div> Fuga	1:43

**Prelude in E-flat minor & Fugue in D-sharp minor** No. 8 BWV 853

es- / dis-Moll · en *mi* bémol / *ré* dièse mineur

<div>15</div> Praeludium	3:39
<div>16</div> Fuga	5:12

Total Time 38:06

**Glenn Gould** piano

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The two parts of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* belong to widely separated periods. The first was finished in 1722, as appears from the dating of the autograph by Bach himself; the second was compiled in 1744, as we learn from the Hamburg organist Schwenke, who in 1781 made a copy of it from an autograph (now lost) belonging to Emmanuel, the title-page of which bore the date 1794.

In Friedemann's *Klavierbüchlein* of 1720 are found eleven preludes from the First Part, among them the one in C major. Bach's revisions of this and three others (in C minor, D minor and E minor) made it probable that the majority of the pieces of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* did not achieve their present perfection at the first stroke, but were continually worked over by the composer with a view to giving them a form that would satisfy him.

Gerber, in his Dictionary, says that Bach composed the First Part of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* at a place where time hung heavily on his hands and no musical instrument was available. There may be some truth in this. Gerber's father had been Bach's pupil in the early Leipzig years, so that the tradition may quite well be based on some remark of Bach's, especially as we know that Gerber was studying the *Well-Tempered Clavier* at that time, and Bach himself played it to him thrice. Bach may well have been in such a situation during some journey with Prince Leopold of Cöthen, when the small portable clavier that figures in the list of the Court instruments would be left behind. The tradition is at any rate correct to this extent, that the majority of pieces in the *Well-Tempered Clavier* were written in a relatively short time. This manner of production was indeed characteristic of Bach. The Second Part was written after he had practically finished with cantata writing.

A number of preludes and fugues, however, existed for some time before Bach conceived the idea of a collection. This holds good for the Second Part no less than for the First. In both there are pieces which, in their original form, really go back almost to the composer's earliest years. Anyone thoroughly conversant with Bach will gradually discover for himself which pieces belong to this category. He will at once see, for example, that of the preludes of the First Part, those in C minor and B-flat major do not show the same maturity as most of the others. That the A minor fugue from the same part is a youthful work is shown not only by a certain thematic looseness and lack of design, but also by the fact that it is evidently written for the pedal clavicembalo. The final note in the bass, prolonged through five bars, cannot be sustained by the hands alone, but needs the pedal, as is often the case in the early works. Otherwise the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, like the Inventions and the Symphonies, is designed primarily for the clavichord, not for the clavicembalo. Bach himself does not appear to have called the 1794 collection the Second Part of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, but simply "Twenty-four new preludes and fugues."

He inscribed the work completed in Cöthen the *Well-Tempered Clavier* by way of celebrating a victory that gave the musical world of that day a satisfaction which we can easily comprehend. On the old keyed instruments it had become impossible to play in all keys, since the fifths and thirds were tuned naturally, according to the absolute intervals given by the divisions of the string. By this method each separate key was made quite true; the others, however, were more or less out of tune, the thirds and fifths that were right for their own key not agreeing among each other. So a plan had to be found for tuning fifths and thirds not absolutely but relatively – to "temper" them

in such a way that though not quite true in any one key they would be bearable in all. The question had really become acute in the sixteenth century, when the new custom arose of allotting a separate string to each note on the clavichord; previously the same string had been used for several notes, the tangents dividing the string into the proper length for the desired tone. The organ also imperatively demanded a tempered tuning.

The question occupied the attention of the Italians Gioseffo Zarlino (1558) and Pietro Aron (1529). At a later date the Halberstadt organ builder Andreas Werkmeister (1645–1706) hit upon a method of tuning that still holds good in principle. He divided the octave into twelve equal semitones, none of which was quite true. His treatise on Musical Temperament appeared in 1691. The problem was solved; henceforth composers could write in all keys. A fairly long time elapsed, however, before all the keys hitherto avoided came into practical use. The celebrated theoretician Heinichen, in his treatise on thorough-bass, published in 1728 – i.e. six years after the origin of Bach's work – confessed that people seldom wrote in B major and A-flat major, and practically never in F-sharp minor and C-sharp major; which shows that he did not know Bach's collection of preludes and fugues.

The title of the First Part runs thus in the autograph: "*The Well-Tempered Clavier*, or preludes and fugues in all tones and semitones, both with the *tertiam majorem* or Ut, Re, Mi, and the *tertiam minorem* or Re, Mi, Fa. For the profit and use of young musicians desirous of knowledge, as also of those who are already skilled in this *studio*, especially by way of pastime; set out and composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, Kapellmeister to the Grand Duke of Anhalt-Cöthen and Director of his chamber music. Anno 1722."

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* is one of those works by which we can measure the progress of artistic culture from one generation to another. When Rochlitz met with these preludes and fugues at the beginning of the nineteenth century, only a few of them really appealed to him. He placed a tick against these, and was astonished to find how the number of these ticks increased as he played the works. If someone had told this first of Bach prophets that in another hundred years every musically-minded man would have regarded each piece in the collection as perfectly easy to comprehend, he would hardly have believed it.

The fact that the work today has become common property may console us for the other fact that an analysis of it is almost as impossible as it is to depict a wood by enumerating the trees and describing their appearance. We can only repeat again and again – take them and play them and penetrate into this world for yourself. Aesthetic elucidation of any kind must necessarily be superficial here. What so fascinates us in the work is not the form or the build of the piece, but the world-view that is mirrored in it. It is not so much that we enjoy the *Well-Tempered Clavier* as that we are edified by it. Joy, sorrow, tears, lamentation, laughter – to all these it gives voice, but in such a way that we are transported from the world of unrest to a world of peace, and see reality in a new way, as if we were sitting by a mountain lake and contemplating hills and woods and clouds in the tranquil and fathomless water.

Nowhere so well as in the *Well-Tempered Clavier* are we made to realize that art was Bach's religion. He does not depict natural soul-states, like Beethoven in his sonatas, no striving and struggling toward a goal, but the reality of life felt by a spirit always conscious of being superior to life, a spirit

in which the most contradictory emotions, wildest grief and exuberant cheerfulness are simply phases of a fundamental superiority of soul. It is this that gives the same transfigured air to the sorrow-laden E-flat minor prelude of the First Part and the carefree, volatile prelude in G major in the Second Part. Whoever has once felt this wonderful tranquility has comprehended the mysterious spirit that has here expressed all it knew and felt of life in the secret language of tone, and will render Bach the thanks we render only to the great souls to whom it is given to reconcile men with life and bring them peace.

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

from J. S. Bach, translated by Ernest Newman