

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* is, in many ways, a bundle of contradictions – and yet, one of the most perfectly-formed bundles of the most beguiling contradictions ever to hit the world of music. It contains some of the most famous keyboard music ever written (the C major prelude of Book 1 is instantly recognisable), and yet also contains scores of little-known numbers, only rarely played out of the context of the whole work, and unfamiliar even to many lifelong pianists. It consists of 48 pairs of pieces, 96 ‘items’ in total, which encompass a kaleidoscope of emotions, styles, affects, and keys – and yet every pair is, ultimately, in the same form: a prelude, taking a simple idea and expanding on it for a minute or two, and then a fugue, a glorified canon or round, each part entering in turn with the same material. It celebrates the relative novelty in Bach’s time of being able to write for keyboard instruments in every major and minor key, courtesy of evolving tuning systems – and yet quite which tuning system was meant by ‘well-tempered’ is still the subject of fierce debate. And it was music written in no small part as tutorial repertoire for children – and yet is understood by performers and listeners alike to somehow illuminate the profoundest secrets of the universe.

It wasn’t even conceived as a whole: what is known today colloquially as ‘The 48’ in fact started life as only 24. In 1722 Bach published a collection of preludes and fugues, one in each of the twelve major and twelve minor keys. For all his tremendous free-spiritedness as both composer and individual, Bach was also a great archivist: he loved collecting and cataloguing (his sequences of organ works organised through the liturgical year, for example, or his compilation of his proudest choral compositions, creating the B minor mass). It was perhaps this love of patterns and collections which drew Bach to the idea of publishing something in every key, combining pre-existing music he’d written over the previous decades (some of which was transposed from the original keys to fill the necessary gaps) with much newly-composed music. Perhaps his motivation was more practical: given that this was certainly teaching music (in the first instance probably for his sons), one of its fundamental purposes must have been to develop fluency in every key – both the reading (some don’t leap naturally off the page, with extreme double sharps to comprehend) and the execution (the shape of every key feeling very different under the hand with different combinations of black and white keys).

Bach was a great extemporiser and much of his organ playing in church would have been improvised. A prelude in that context might have been an elaboration on a hymn tune of the day, or a free piece to fill a liturgical silence. Similarly in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, there is the sense that each prelude takes a kernel of an idea – a flowing broken arpeggio, or a dotted rhythm, or a rapid semiquaver motif – and rolls it out across two or three pages of music. Often the fundamental unifying idea remains throughout, but is constantly cast in new light in the hands of Bach’s extraordinary harmonic progressions – not unlike creating a painting out of one type of brushstroke, but using different colours to create a whole scene. And of course every painting is unique: Bach draws on all the available musical styles around him – lilting dance forms, spacious Renaissance choral music, virtuosic instrumental music, grand organ music – to create a vast compendium of musical expression and mood.

Of all the textures deployed in keyboard music, it is counterpoint that is widely seen as the most challenging: in contrapuntal writing, multiple voices (three or four, perhaps) – as might be written for three or four separate instruments or singers, all equally important and constantly interacting – are played by just two hands, ten fingers, at the keyboard. In a fugue,

as in a round, one voice starts alone, and each enters in turn with the same material: but unlike a round, each enters in a carefully devised sequence of related keys (rather than all at the same pitch) – sending the music on the beginnings of a journey elsewhere, rather than simply round in circles. Above or below each statement of the subject is a similarly recurring countersubject: the elements of these pieces of material – whether they move angularly or smoothly, whether they have a distinctive leap or move by step, whether they are protracted or just consist of a few notes – provide the basis for each fugue, and Bach's great skill was seeing all the possibilities of what could unfold even as he created each starting point. Not only does the subject recur throughout the fugue, constantly in new keys, but it is also adapted, appearing perhaps at double or half speed, or inverted to appear upside down. Analysing these complex jigsaw puzzles of counterpoint can be quite mind-boggling – but, in the same way as a performer's technique only exists to serve expressive ends, so for composers the skill of writing an elaborately crafted fugue only matters if it has something to say. And this is where Bach is – in my opinion – set apart from all others. Not only is his mastery of the form astonishing (in its architecture, its invention, and its pacing), but he then uses this music to speak with utter humanity and a profound spirituality.

Twenty years later Bach repeated the idea, publishing a second book following the same pattern of a prelude and fugue in every major and minor key. Combined, these two books give us 'the 48'. When assembling the first book, in Köthen, Bach was predominantly preoccupied with writing instrumental music for the court – the Brandenburg concertos, many sonatas, the unaccompanied violin and cello suites – whereas by the time of Book 2 he was in Leipzig and writing huge quantities of choral music – cantatas every week, and also the great Passions. Perhaps these different focuses feed into each respective book. Certainly his style has evolved significantly by the time of Book 2: the forms are longer, the harmonic journeys wilder, and the *gallant* style of the next generation can be heard infusing the music. In places in Book 2, it almost feels that Mozart is waiting in the wings!

'The 48' have inspired musicians through the centuries: Schumann played them daily, composers from Beethoven to Chopin to Debussy knew them intimately. Brahms declared, 'Study Bach, there you will find everything.' Nina Simone said, 'Once I understood Bach's music, I wanted to be a concert pianist. Bach made me dedicate my life to music.' But perhaps my favourite comment is from Douglas Adams: 'I don't think a greater genius has walked the earth. Of the three great composers Mozart tells us what it's like to be human, Beethoven tells us what it's like to be Beethoven and Bach tells us what it's like to be the universe.'

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