

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 22 February 2026
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

The Well-tempered Clavier Book I (1722)

Prelude and Fugue in C BWV846
Prelude and Fugue in C minor BWV847
Prelude and Fugue in C sharp BWV848
Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor BWV849
Prelude and Fugue in D BWV850
Prelude and Fugue in D minor BWV851
Prelude and Fugue in E flat BWV852
Prelude and Fugue in E flat minor BWV853
Prelude and Fugue in E BWV854
Prelude and Fugue in E minor BWV855
Prelude and Fugue in F BWV856
Prelude and Fugue in F minor BWV857
Prelude and Fugue in F sharp BWV858
Prelude and Fugue in F sharp minor BWV859
Prelude and Fugue in G BWV860
Prelude and Fugue in G minor BWV861
Prelude and Fugue in A flat BWV862
Prelude and Fugue in G sharp minor BWV863
Prelude and Fugue in A BWV864
Prelude and Fugue in A minor BWV865
Prelude and Fugue in B flat BWV866
Prelude and Fugue in B flat minor BWV867
Prelude and Fugue in B BWV868
Prelude and Fugue in B minor BWV869



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The seeds of Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* – dubbed by conductor Hans von Bülow the 'Old Testament', to the 'New Testament' of Beethoven's sonatas – lie in the education of his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann. In January 1720 Bach presented the nine-year-old Wilhelm Friedemann with a 'little keyboard book' into which he wrote pieces designed to hone his musical skills. These include 11 of the first 12 preludes of what became Book One of *The Well-tempered Clavier*.

By 1722 the 11 preludes, some transposed into the more abstruse keys, had become 24 preludes and fugues, arranged in chromatically ascending sequence. On the title page Bach set out his purpose: 'The Well-tempered Clavier, or Preludes and Fugues through all the tones and semitones ... For the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning and especially for the enjoyment of those already experienced...' The first book of *The Well-tempered Clavier* duly became Bach's prime teaching material. Keyboard students learnt to play in all keys across a wide gamut of idioms, while composition pupils studied contrapuntal techniques ranging from the Palestrina-inspired *stile antico* to the fashionably up-to-date.

Bach's use of the generic 'clavier' indicates that he wanted to make the music available to players of any keyboard instrument – harpsichord, clavichord, organ, spinet. No one can be completely sure exactly what he meant by 'well-tempered'. One clue comes from Bach's obituary, written by his second son Carl Philipp Emanuel and his pupil Johann Friedrich Agricola: 'In the tuning of harpsichords he achieved so correct and so pure a temperament that all the keys sounded pure and agreeable. He knew no keys which, because of impure intonation, should be avoided.' While ensuring that all 24 keys were tolerable to the ear, Bach's tuning system would have made some keys more 'well-tempered' than others. The resulting differences of colour, including a degree of harshness in 'extreme' keys such as C sharp and F sharp major, are inevitably lost in today's equal temperament.

Bach's was a famously encyclopaedic nature. And Book One of *The Well-tempered Clavier*, like its successor, is dazzling in its diversity. This is music that challenges the mind and fingers, touches the heart and celebrates the joy of bodily motion. While the collection evolved over several years, it is no accident that it begins with the simplest prelude in the purest key – on to which Gounod grafted his syrupy *Ave Maria* – and ends with the longest and most profound of the fugues.

The preludes showcase various types of keyboard texture. Several, including the preludes in C major, D major and D minor, elaborate a broken arpeggio pattern, in the manner of a lute improvisation. The preludes in C minor and B flat major are coruscating *moto perpetuo* toccatas. Throughout the collection,

the lilt of the dance, grave or exuberant, is rarely far away. Some of the preludes, such as the ebullient, gigue-like F major, are two-part inventions, while two – the G sharp minor and B major – are three-part inventions. For the preludes in E flat minor (a poignant sarabande) and E minor Bach writes an ornamental, Italianate *arioso* that could easily be transcribed for oboe or violin.

Bach is at his most galant in the catchy A flat Prelude, popularised in a gently swung version by the Swingle Singers. Conversely, the Prelude in E flat is an elaborate structure in three separate sections, with a quasi-improvisatory opening, a chorale-based *fugato* at its centre and a closing fugue that combines the chorale with the improvisatory flourishes of the opening. After this cerebration, the E flat Fugue – the lightest in Book One of *The Well-tempered Clavier* – sounds like a witty *jeu d'esprit*.

Beginning with the calm unfolding of the C major Fugue, the fugues of Book One likewise explore a vast array of styles with encyclopaedic thoroughness. While most are in three or four parts, there are two in five parts (the *stile antico* fugues in C sharp minor and B flat minor) and one, the brilliant, toccata-like E minor, in just two – a fugal two-part invention. Bach deploys every contrapuntal trick of the trade, including stretto (with the fugal entries piling in on each other), inversion and (in the ruminative Fugue in D sharp minor) augmentation – the theme presented in longer note values. Some of the fugues have one, two, even (in the chromatically contorted F minor Fugue) three countersubjects, others have none.

In contrast to the often mystic remoteness of the *stile antico* fugues, where music, mathematics and philosophy commingle, are fugues such as those in C sharp, F sharp and B flat major that dance and frolic with a galant grace. In the G minor Fugue, with its characteristically angular, 'difficult' subject, the minor key becomes a vehicle for cussed humour. The majestically rolling D major Fugue evokes a French Baroque Overture, the F major is a mellifluous minuet, while the A flat Fugue, complementing its 'Swingles' Prelude, is a chic gavotte.

The preludes and fugues in B flat minor and B minor – Bach at his most inward – make a magnificent climax to the collection. The B flat minor couples its austere imposing *stile antico* fugue with a sorrowing Prelude that has been likened to the opening chorus of the *St Matthew Passion*. No less moving is the B minor pairing: a grave Prelude that unfolds over a 'walking' bass (shades here of Corelli), and a chromatically searching Fugue whose mingled grandeur and penitential awe prefigures the first Kyrie of the Mass in B minor.

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