

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 24 July 2022 7.30pm

Ewa Póblocka piano



Financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland as part of the multi-annual programme NIEPODŁĘGLA 2017–2022

**Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750)

**The Well-tempered Clavier Book II** (c.1740)

*Prelude and Fugue in C BWV870*  
*Prelude and Fugue in C minor BWV871*  
*Prelude and Fugue in C sharp BWV872*  
*Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor BWV873*  
*Prelude and Fugue in D BWV874*  
*Prelude and Fugue in D minor BWV875*  
*Prelude and Fugue in E flat BWV876*  
*Prelude and Fugue in E flat minor BWV877*  
*Prelude and Fugue in E BWV878*  
*Prelude and Fugue in E minor BWV879*  
*Prelude and Fugue in F BWV880*  
*Prelude and Fugue in F minor BWV881*

Interval

*Prelude and Fugue in F sharp BWV882*  
*Prelude and Fugue in F sharp minor BWV883*  
*Prelude and Fugue in G BWV884*  
*Prelude and Fugue in G minor BWV885*  
*Prelude and Fugue in A flat BWV886*  
*Prelude and Fugue in G sharp minor BWV887*  
*Prelude and Fugue in A BWV888*  
*Prelude and Fugue in A minor BWV889*  
*Prelude and Fugue in B flat BWV890*  
*Prelude and Fugue in B flat minor BWV891*  
*Prelude and Fugue in B BWV892*  
*Prelude and Fugue in B minor BWV893*

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It was characteristic of **JS Bach** throughout his life to take an existing musical genre - the concerto, the cantata, the motet, the Passion - and raise it to unprecedented levels of compositional virtuosity. So it was with his most celebrated keyboard work, the two books of *The Well-tempered Clavier*, dubbed by conductor Hans von Bülow the 'Old Testament', to the 'New Testament' of Beethoven's sonatas.

The seeds seem to have been sown by the Baden-based composer Johann Fischer, who in 1702 published a set of preludes and fugues in all the major and minor keys. Bach, we might guess, was spurred by the challenge Fischer's work presented. In January 1720 he presented his nine-year-old son Wilhelm Friedemann with a 'little keyboard book' into which he wrote pieces designed to hone technical skills. These included early versions of 11 of the first 12 preludes of what became Book I of *The Well-tempered Clavier*.

By 1722 11 preludes had become 24 fully fledged preludes and fugues, arranged in chromatically ascending key sequence.

While no one can be sure exactly what Bach meant by 'well-tempered', one clue comes from his obituary, written by his second son Carl Philipp Emanuel and 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 and character, including a degree of harshness in 'extreme' keys such as C sharp and F sharp major, with their relatively sharp major thirds, are inevitably lost in today's equal temperament.

20 years elapsed before Bach completed what he dubbed 'twenty-four new preludes and fugues', drawing on pieces written at various times. Two years later his pupil and future son-in-law Johann Christoph Altnickol copied them out and appended the title *The Well-tempered Clavier Book II*. Like Book I of 'The 48', the new collection circulated widely in manuscript, and was certainly known to composers such as Mozart and Beethoven.

Bach's was a famously encyclopedic nature. And like its predecessor, Book II of *The Well-tempered Clavier* is dazzling in its diversity of style and expression. This is music that challenges the mind and fingers, touches the heart and celebrates the joy of bodily motion. As with Book I, Bach's purpose was both to instruct and give delight. His keyboard students learnt to play in all keys, across a wide gamut of idioms, while his composition pupils could study contrapuntal techniques in styles ranging from the Palestrina-inspired *stile antico* to the fashionably up-to-date.

The preludes in Book II are generally on an ampler scale than those in Book I. In contrast to the serene simplicity of the famous C major Prelude in Book I, its counterpart in Book II is a grand, richly

textured affair that unfolds over an octave pedal bass. Some of the preludes, including those in C sharp minor, D major and D sharp minor, are in an embryonic sonata form. Reflecting their later date, they tend to be more modern, often more vocal, in style than those in Book I. Sometimes, as in the 'sighing' preludes in F minor (popularised by the Swingle Singers) and G sharp minor, the music suggests the *empfindsamer Stil* ('sensitive style') cultivated by Bach's sons Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel.

Bach is at his most extrovert in the D major Prelude, with its trumpeting arpeggios, and the concerto-like Prelude in B major. The F sharp minor is a vocally inspired arioso, while the preludes in E flat major and A major have a charming pastoral flavour. The delicious G major Prelude evokes pealing bells.

In extreme contrast are the preludes in A minor and B flat minor. The former is a two-part invention that pushes chromaticism to its 18th-century limits, while the latter is a three-part invention of veiled melancholy that sets the scene for its austere fugue. Bach also suggests bells in the C sharp major Prelude, which begins with the kind of broken arpeggio pattern familiar from Book I and ends with a chirpy fughetta - perfect preparation for the skipping fugue that follows.

While all the fugues of Book II are in three or four parts, their stylistic range is wider than those in Book I. Representing the strictest *stile antico* is the E major Fugue, based on an ancient chant. We can sense Bach setting himself the challenge of seeing how many permutations of the subject he could create.

Ancient meets modern in the massive, inward-looking D sharp minor Fugue, described by musicologist Donald Francis Tovey as 'an Aeschylean chorus'. The A minor Fugue is based on essentially the same angular chromatic subject used by, *inter alia*, Handel in 'And with his stripes we are healed' and Mozart in the 'Kyrie' of the *Requiem*.

On the whole, though, the fugues of Book II are more 'modern' in feeling than those in Book I. From the puckish C major Fugue, *galant* charm and the spirit of the dance are often to the fore. Several are in the rhythm of a gigue, distinctly skewed in the E minor, airborne in the F major, perhaps the most delightfully frivolous fugue Bach ever wrote. The F minor Fugue is a bourrée, the F sharp minor a gavotte, the B flat major a serenely flowing minuet.

As if in deliberate reaction to its monumental counterpart in Book I, the closing B minor Fugue is a frolicking *passepied*, livelier cousin of the minuet: another nod towards the newly fashionable *galant* style and confirmation, if it were still needed, that the minor mode in Bach can be a vehicle for inspired levity as well as sorrow or disquiet.

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