

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 25 February 2023
11.30am

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

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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A Few Remarks

The 1742 compilation by **JS Bach** of, as he put it on the title page of the autograph, 'twenty-four more preludes and fugues' is an obvious reference to his earlier collection referred to in a 1722 manuscript as the 'Well-tempered Clavier...of preludes and fugues through all the tones and semitones.' The artistic contrasts between the two collections which were, after all, compiled some 20 years apart bear some reflection. The more ambitious scale of the compositions in Book II means that the collection is rather longer by about half simply in terms of performance time. Likewise, the proportions of Book II are totally different from Book I insofar as the prelude and fugue pairs in the earlier collection were conceived in an obvious tribute to 17th-century practice, wherein the prelude was essentially an improvised meditation on a given pattern throughout various harmonies in order to introduce the fugue. The preludes of the later collection, on the other hand, are extended contemplations on the more Classical forms already being developed by his sons. Thus we have a Scarlattian melodic flavour in incipient German sonata form in the D major prelude, and the concerto-like textures of the preludes in F# and B major which are clearly calculated to exploit the wider expressive range of the harpsichord such as it had developed by the 1740s. As with the slightly later *Art of Fugue*, the second book of the *Well-tempered Clavier* represents Bach's conversation with modernity as much as it does his endless brooding on the rich musical traditions to which he was the acknowledged heir.

The fugues in the second book are in their turn generally longer and more harmonically adventurous than those in the first volume, and like the preludes seem to owe as much to later notions of thematic recapitulation as they do to earlier contrapuntal practice; interestingly, one fugue in the second

volume is written in the austere counterpoint of the *stile antico* (namely E major). Further to this point, the various countersubjects and subsidiary material have a greater importance in comparison to the monothematic nature of the fugues from the earlier collection - one is reminded in this respect of CPE Bach's remark from the 1754 *Nekrolog* (obituary) that 'no one brought so many highly inventive and unfamiliar ideas to what seem otherwise dry works of artifice as he [Johann Sebastian] did...his melodies were truly singular, but always diverse, rich in invention, and like those of no other composer.'

A word or two on the text seems in order. Whilst the title of 'Second Book of the Well-tempered Clavier' is found only in the copies by Johann Christoph Altnickol (c.1744 and 1755, respectively), it is most likely that this moniker originated with Bach himself, as do the many interesting variants from the secondary manuscripts which enliven the score with a performer's flair. As Donald Tovey noted in his unsurpassed edition of 1924, 'an autograph is not always superior...to the copy of a pupil or a son-in-law.'

I have thus, when I felt appropriate, followed both of the Altnickol copies as my primary sources when it comes to certain textual decisions, followed by the equally interesting (if not always philologically sound) readings by Johann Kirnberger and his circle, admittedly from the latter half of the 18th Century, and, in the case of the G major prelude I have chosen a work paired with the same fugue in the collection of Johann Peter Kellner (BWV902) for the simple reason that I like the piece. At the end of the day, the rhetoric of pedantry (though rather enjoyable in its own way) is simply a mask for what are basically aesthetic choices.

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