

# Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

# Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II

## Disc 1

1	Prelude No. 1 in C Major, BWV 870	2. 54
2	Fugue No.1 in C Major, BWV 870	1. 52
3	Prelude No. 2 in C Minor, BWV 871	1. 30
4	Fugue No. 2 in C Minor, BWV 871	2. 14
5	Prelude No. 3 in C-Sharp Major, BWV 872	1. 43
6	Fugue No. 3 in C-Sharp Major, BWV 872	1. 47
7	Prelude No. 4 in C-Sharp Minor, BWV 873	4. 38
8	Fugue No. 4 in C-Sharp Minor, BWV 873	2. 21
9	Prelude No. 5 in D Major, BWV 874	2. 30
10	Fugue No. 5 in D Major, BWV 874	2. 46
11	Prelude No. 6 in D Minor, BWV 875	1. 35
12	Fugue No. 6 in D Minor, BWV 875	1. 57
13	Prelude No. 7 in E-Flat Major, BWV 876	2. 03
14	Fugue No. 7 in E-Flat Major, BWV 876	1. 54
15	Prelude No. 8 in D-Sharp Minor, BWV 877	2. 12
16	Fugue No. 8 in D-Sharp Minor, BWV 877	3. 30
17	Prelude No. 9 in E Major, BWV 878	2. 24
18	Fugue No. 9 in E Major, BWV 878	3. 15

19	Prelude No. 10 in E Minor, BWV 879		2. 00
20	Fugue No. 10 in E Minor, BWV 879		3. 00
21	Prelude No. 11 in F Major, BWV 880		3. 28
22	Fugue No. 11 in F Major, BWV 880		1. 51
23	Prelude No. 12 in F Minor, BWV 881		2. 32
24	Fugue No. 12 in F Minor, BWV 881		1. 49
		Total playing time Disc 1:	57. 57
Disc	: 2		
1	Prelude No. 13 in F-Sharp Major, BWV 882		2. 59
2	Fugue No. 13 in F-Sharp Major, BWV 882		2. 23
3	Prelude No. 14 in F-Sharp Minor, BWV 883		2. 49
4	Fugue No. 14 in F-Sharp Minor, BWV 883		3. 25
5	Prelude No. 15 in G Major, BWV 884		1. 09
6	Fugue No. 15 in G Major, BWV 884		1. 21
7	Prelude No. 16 in G Minor, BWV 885		2. 41
8	Fugue No. 16 in G Minor, BWV 885		2. 55
9	Prelude No. 17 in A-Flat Major, BWV 886		3. 08
10	Fugue No. 17 in A-Flat Major, BWV 886		3. 03
11	Prelude No. 18 in G-Sharp Minor, BWV 887		2. 49
12	Fugue No. 18 in G-Sharp Minor, BWV 887		3. 52
13	Prelude No. 19 in A Major, BWV 888		1. 50
14	Fugue No. 19 in A Major, BWV 888		1. 20





























15	Prelude No. 20 in A Minor, BWV 889	2. 30
16	Fugue No. 20 in A Minor, BWV 889	1. 50
17	Prelude No. 21 in B-Flat Major, BWV 890	3. 15
18	Fugue No. 21 in B-Flat Major, BWV 890	2. 16
19	Prelude No. 22 in B-Flat Minor, BWV 891	2. 16
20	Fugue No. 22 in B-Flat Minor, BWV 891	4. 32
21	Prelude No. 23 in B Major, BWV 892	1. 31
22	Fugue No. 23 in B Major, BWV 892	3. 00
23	Prelude No. 24 in B Minor, BWV 893	2. 01
24	Fugue No. 24 in B Minor, BWV 893	2. 03

Total playing time Disc 2:

61. 12

Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano



















To present the entirety of a collection such as the Second Book of The Well-Tempered Clavier? But then, how can one do justice, acoustically, to the extraordinary multiplicity of this compendium? To the infinite variety of contrapuntal techniques, formal designs, instrumental textures, characterizations, and references to dance?

Each of the 48 pieces is unique and demands specific interpretative choices. One of the challenges lies in modulating the instrumental sound to convey the virtuosic crackle of the harpsichord, the ever-singing articulation of string instruments, or the spacious transparency of the organ; in creating distinct sonic spaces to evoke the intimacy — almost confessional — of the clavichord, or the radiant fullness of an a cappella choir; in choosing the appropriate acoustic context for a fiery toccata, an aria a due, or a trio sonata.

This is why each section of this recording exhibits ranges and combinations of tools of sound production and capture. The piano's setup alternately favours one or another dimension of vocality (cantabile, articulation...); its position and orientation in the recording studio influence the shape and breath of the sound; the type of microphones, their placement, and their balance during mixing all contribute to forging its identity.

The aim is to generate sound sources that respond to the polyphonic and expressive needs of each piece, and to let them breathe in the right acoustic space. I hope these choices honour the unsurpassed synthesis of styles that gives this monumental work its enduring value as a testament of its time.

#### Pierre-Laurent Aimard

























In addition to all other demands upon his time - church organist, cantata composer, civil servant, and (most irksome of all) Latin tutor to mischievous choir boys - Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) also taught numerous pupils within his family orbit. He always needed small-scale works with which to demonstrate principles of composition. Several volumes collated these pieces, including two from the early 1720s. Bach had recently remarried after his first wife's death, and the Notebooks for Anna Magdalena Bach contain dozens of pieces written out by his new bride. Another important collection, a Notebook for Wilhelm Friedemann, includes music Bach used when teaching his young sons. These simple works, crystalline in their structural clarity, show the patterned harmonic progression and general shape that would become central to more expansive preludes in The Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1, completed in 1722.

By nature, a prelude serves several functions, one of which is to allow a performer to improvise or "warm up" within a particular key. It may lead into a more structured series of contrapuntal episodes or a set of tonally-related dances. To his preludes, Bach usually joined a fugue in the same key. Like partners in a dance, prelude and fugue pairings express themselves best when in each other's company. A prelude sets the key in our ears and delights by virtue of various textures, melodic turns of phrase, and harmonic color. The fugue then imposes a certain order on affairs; it is architecturally sound yet aesthetically moving, guiding our minds through a series of contrapuntal twists and turns.

Building on examples from his predecessors, Bach decided to produce a set of preludes and fugues in all 24 possible keys. Before the 18th century, not every key was usable due to inconsistencies in different

tuning systems. Unequal systems or temperaments allowed the most common keys to sound wonderfully in tune, but outlier tonalities (for instance, F-Sharp Major or B-Flat Minor) contained harsh, discordant intervals that rendered them off limits. Hence earlier collections tended to be smaller series of organ Magnificats, for instance, demonstrating only the eight church keys or modes. Even Bach's own two-voice Inventions and three-voice Sinfonias use only 15 keys, staying within the limited range of four sharps and flats (e.g., E Major and F Minor).

Bach's enlargement to embrace all 24 major and minor keys in *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier* represents a significant milestone. And the title directly comments on that fact. As mentioned above - skirting the edges of a tangled topic - older tuning systems sought purity of certain commonly-used intervals at the expense of entire

swaths of other pitches. Eventually, most of Western Europe would adopt equal temperament: a system that divides the musical octave into 12 equal steps, thereby ensuring access to all keys uniformly. The term wohltemperierte or "well-tempered" proceeds in that direction but does not call for exact consistency. Instead, it provides a compromise. Not all keys and intervals are mathematically equal, yet enough adjustments are made to allow the musician to compose or perform in each of the 24 keys.

It may suffice, then, to say that Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier served a demonstrable and pedagogical function. Having spectacularly achieved that purpose in the first book of the WTC (1722), what need for a second complete collection of preludes and fugues twenty years later? Casual admirers usually get no further than WTC 1. Appreciation for WTC 2 seems more rare, the collection

























itself a bit more esoteric, a realm perhaps for connoisseurs. The composer himself did not prepare a handwritten fair copy, suggesting that he viewed it somewhat less formally or publicly than WTC 1. By the early 1740s Bach was nearing the end of his life. He could afford to entertain valedictory projects that would memorialize his abiding interest in polyphony (i.e., The Art of Fugue and The Musical Offering). It is also possible - and this is relevant in terms of the present recording - that Bach felt a renewed interest in keyboard composition due to the new fortepianos reaching the market. For various reasons, therefore, he still had much to say in the Prelude and Fugue genre from a purely creative standpoint.

From the widest perspective, both collections present pairs of tonally-unified preludes and fugues. And yet, like the twinning resemblance between parent and child, there are important differences that mark WTC 2 as better suited to its

time. Let's begin with the preludes. First, the "pattern preludes" familiar from the 1722 collection are largely missing by the time Bach put pen to paper in the 1740s. Several WTC 2 preludes even last longer than their companion fugues. Second, counterpoint plays a significant role in so many preludes that it becomes the dominant aesthetic experience of the entire collection, even beyond the nominal fugues. Numerous preludes (c, d,  $d^{\flat}$ , e, G, a, and others) feature invertible counterpoint in the manner of the two-part Inventions; one Prelude (C#) even includes a Fughetta within its bounds. Further, somewhat hidden within the generic Prelude designation are many binary-form dances, including the Allemande (c, D, d#, E, a), Corrente (e), Bourrée (f), and Gique (F, Bb). Others touch on specific musical topics, such as French Overture (F# and q), Pastorale (A), March (e), and the Toccata (d, G, g<sup>‡</sup>, B). This astounding diversity of style, form, and topic helps enliven music

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that, in lesser hands, could become stale and repetitive.

Regarding the companion fugues, a similar wealth of invention carries technical complexity into the realm of aesthetic enjoyment. In WTC 1, Bach flirted with extreme examples of two- and even five-voiced fugues; by 1744 the field has been leveled out to include only examples in three and four voices. The most common fugue types feature a subject in "instrumental style," creating polyphonic displays of vigor and motoric intensity (C, f, f\*, G, g, A,  $a, b^{\flat}, b$ ). Some of these  $(d, f^{\sharp}, Ab, g^{\sharp}, a, b^{\flat})$ bb) are also bolstered by a high degree of chromaticism, further intensifying the listening experience. Still, Bach also found space for fugues marked by deep introspection - and usually a slower tempo (c, q#) - as well as some inspired by his study of older vocal music  $(E^{\flat}, E, B)$ . As in the preludes, we encounter dances among the fugues,

including a Gigue (c#), Bourrée (f), Gavotte (F#), Minuet (Bb), and Passepied (b). Finally, on some occasions Bach found that a single fugue subject was inadequate to capture his prodigious ambitions. Four examples ( $f^{\sharp}$ ,  $g^{\sharp}$ ,  $B^{\flat}$ , B) offer double or triple fugues, often closing with a statement of all themes at the same time.

Such intricate counterpoint was generally rejected by the generation of Bach's sons and students, and his music fell out of fashion for many years. Yet The Well-Tempered Clavier retained an important place on composers' desks. Mozart and Beethoven both admired the grandly synthetic scale of Bach's effort; the former transcribed several WTC fugues for string quartet, and Beethoven's early command of the entire opus helped fuel his prodigious reputation. Composerpianists from Chopin and Schumann to Shostakovich lavishly paid homage to the WTC.























What these masters found in Bach's keyboard music is still there for us to discover - maybe rediscover - today.

# Jason Stell

2025



















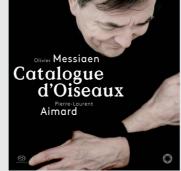




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Executive producer Renaud Loranger Recording producer Christoph Classen

#### **ARTWORK**

Liner notes Jason Stell | Photography Marco Borggreve Cover design Marjolein Coenrady (PENTATONE) Booklet coordination & design Karolina Szymanik (PENTATONE)

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