

J.S. BACH AND THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER

INTRODUCTION

The Well-Tempered Clavier (German: Das Wohltemperierte Klavier), is a collection of solo keyboard music composed by Johann Sebastian Bach. He first gave the title to a book of preludes and fugues in all 24 major and minor keys, dated 1722. He later compiled a second book of the same kind, dated 1742, and titled "Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues." The two works are not usually considered to comprise "The Well-Tempered Clavier" and are referred to respectively as Books I and II. The Well-Tempered Clavier is generally regarded as one of the most influential works in the history of Western classical music. These two books were widely circulated in manuscript, but printed copies were not made until 1801. Although Bach's style went out of favor in the time around his death, The Well-Tempered Clavier did not, and in doing so, it began to influence the course of musical history. Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were two composers in the Classical era who studied the work closely.

ORGANIZATION

Each book contains twenty-four pairs of preludes and fugues. The first pair is in C major, the second in C minor, the third in C-sharp minor, the fourth in C-sharp major, and so on. The rising chromatic pattern continues until every key has been represented, finishing with a B-minor fugue.

MUSICAL STYLE AND CONTENT

Musically, the structural regularities of the Well-Tempered Clavier encompass an extraordinarily wide range of styles, more so than most pieces in the literature. The Preludes are formally free, although many individual numbers exhibit typical Baroque melodic forms, often coupled to an extended free coda. Each fugue is marked with the number of voices, from two to five. Most are three- and four-voiced fugues. The fugues employ a full range of contrapuntal devices but are generally more compact than Bach's fugues for organ. Contrapuntal devices are part of counterpoint (counterpoint is the relationship between two or more voices that are independent in contour and rhythm and are harmonically independent).

INTENDED TUNING

Bach's title suggests that he had written for a twelve note-well-tempered tuning system in which all keys sounded in tune. Scholars disagree as to what Bach's actual intention was in writing these pieces, whether equal temperament, well temperament, or a range of similar temperaments, perhaps even altered slightly in practice from piece to piece. During much of the 20th century it was assumed that Bach wanted equal temperament, which had been described by theorists and musicians for at least a century before Bach's birth. Internal evidence for this may be seen in the fact that in Book I, Bach paired the E-flat minor prelude (6 flats) with its enharmonic key of D-sharp minor (6 sharps) for the fugue (6 sharps and 6 flats are enharmonically equivalent, meaning sound the same on a musical instrument). Any performance of this pair would have required both of these enharmonic keys to sound identically tuned, thus implying equal temperament in the one pair, as the entire work implies as a whole.

LATER SIGNIFICANCE AND INFLUENCE

Although the Well-Tempered Clavier as not the first pantonal (using all keys) composition, it was by far the most influential. The tuning requirement for harmonies became the basis for all Western music developed through the early 20th century, as it didn't have to be tuned to new fundamentals. In addition to its use of all keys, the Well-Tempered Clavier was unusual in the very wide range of techniques and modes of expression used by Bach in the fugues. No other composer had produced such vividly characterized and compelling pieces in the fugal form,

which was often regarded as a theoretical exercise. Many later composers studied Bach's work in an effort to improve their own fugal writing. Many composers have made complete recordings of the Well-Tempered Clavier.