

Performing Fugue No. 1

C Major

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 1, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

The C Major fugue sets a high standard for purity: it seems to me to evoke the feeling and sound of an ancient stone church with a fine organ.

There is a famous old recording of that great master of Bach, Ferruccio Busoni, performing this fugue in which it sounds as if the damper pedal has been depressed from beginning to end. Sometimes we ridicule such things as outdated and without stylistic merit. But I would suggest that we rise above such easy judgments and consider how Busoni's interpretation contains an element of beauty.

For me Busoni has found, in the sympathetic vibrations of strings and the continuing resonance of the pedal, a fitting analogue for that old stone church. The resonance creates a devotional halo that is thoroughly appropriate to this piece. Although I'm not as daring as Busoni, I've tried to keep that aural image in mind in my own performances of this piece--if you have really big speakers you might pick up some of my outrageous pedaling!

Most of the fugues of the *WTC* create expectations of diminished intensity by alternating passages where the subject is present with others where it is not. This fugue defeats that expectation: the subject is always present--either by itself, or in stretto.

The continual presence of the subject presents a special challenge to the performer: textural variation and the building of dramatic tension must be achieved without the relief of intervening episodes. Modulations are without the

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usual sequences (admittedly a compositional challenge more so than to the performer).

The addition of voices in the exposition creates a textural crescendo; more notes result in more sound. So the dropping of a voice is an important marker for the performer. The exposition ends at bar 7 where Bach has dropped the alto from the texture. Even though bars 7 and 8 present the subject in canon, they feel lighter than the preceded measures.

In the first development Bach has prepared a new accumulation of textural density, culminating in the heightened tension of a modulation to A-minor (bars 12-13). The full four-voice texture returns only after brief silences from the bass and tenor voices as well (bars 9-10).

To recapitulate: bars 1-6 increase in intensity, bars 7-8 offer relief, bar 9 briefly rises only to fall, bars 10 and 11 attenuate then gain strength by the addition of G-sharps which add a powerful momentum to bars 11-13. The performer need only follow the "lead" of that tone, the four-voice texture, and the minor mode to bars 12-13, the dramatic climax. The drama of the first half is heightened by the open octave A's with which it closes.

Bach has written the first half so that these shapes are self-evident. The trick is to play them without hitting the listener over the head.

The second half unfolds a series of stretti, the first of which (bars 14-16) offers a microcosm of keys already traversed: C, G, A-minor. Having summed everything up so neatly, Bach is now free to modulate downward to D minor (bars 17-19) then up to G (bars 20-21) and back home to C. So the tonal trajectory of keys A-D-G mimics la-re-sol of the subject that has itself quoted the prelude.

Just as it is natural to phrase the subject toward the G on the second eighth of bar 2, it is natural to phrase the whole fugue to the G-pedal in the middle of bar 21, leading to the effective climax of the piece on soprano and bass A's in the middle of bar 22.

All those A's suggest another possible approach to shaping this fugue: as a series of attempts to rise to the final high C, consistently arrested at A-natural in bars 1, 8, 14, 17-19, 22, 25). This C is the highest pitch that Bach has used in Book I, so its presence here is of "high" importance. It is appropriate to approach it with a diminuendo, emphasizing the unusual registral and timbral significance of the fugue's close.