

# Performing Fugue No. 5

D Major

*Well-Tempered Clavier Book I*

Johann Sebastian Bach

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## **Subject:** Fugue No. 5, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

This fugue allows me to address the knotty problem of how to treat dotted rhythms in Bach's appropriations of French overture style. The conventional wisdom, the one that I grew up with, is that you should over-dot. Tovey's edition goes so far as to suggest a re-notation of the subject in double-dotted eighths and thirty-seconds.

But if you double-dot the subject what will you do when you reach the sequences of bars 9-10 and 17-19? Here Bach has augmented the second half of the subject's flourish in a series of sixteenth notes accompanied by chords in dotted values. Bear in mind that Bach's notation of the sequences is consistent with his notation of the subject--single dots all. Should the performer be consistent too?

Of course I am aware of the saying that, "consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds." But I also think that the simplest and most elegant solution is usually the best (too many mathematicians growing up in my house). It is intuitively clear to me that the fourth sixteenth note in each group should line up with the chord!

Having said that, I have in this performance tried to capture the rhythmic impetus of double-dotting without actually changing the notated rhythm. How? Well, with tone--a pianistic resource that Bach did not have the opportunity to use.

Another rhythmic issue, and one that seems idiosyncratically Bachian to me, is how to interpret the odd beats of bar 3 and bar 6. A footnote in the Henle

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edition suggests that the thirty-seconds are to be played accurately, necessitating a shortening of the dotted eighth. But I have argued that the dotted eighth should be the consistent value. This would mean that the three thirty-second notes would be executed as a triplet.

Ultimately this might be just a matter of taste. I personally think that triplets are rhythmically more convincing and better suited to the expected flourish of the style. But I can offer additional evidence in support of my theory.

In Book II of the *WTC* there are two preludes in a combination of Italian concerto and French Overture style. In the F-sharp major prelude Bach has written a dotted eighth followed by three thirty-second notes; in the A-flat major prelude he has consistently notated an eighth (not dotted) tied to a thirty-second followed by three thirty-second notes.

If my reasoning is correct, then these two preludes are different animals. The common argument in support of Henle (among others) is that Bach didn't know how to notate dotted rhythms accurately. In response I would ask why Bach bothered to make the distinction that he has made in these two preludes? The implication of my argument (reading the former as triplets, the latter as literal thirty-seconds) is to make the F-sharp prelude sound more French and the A-flat prelude sound more Italian. *Vive la difference!*