

Performing Fugue No. 8

D-Sharp minor (E-Flat minor)

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 8, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

Bach's choice of a key signature for this fugue seems peculiar. As the score at the top of this page shows, it seems easier to read and understand when it is notated in E-flat minor. However, Bach originally represented the fugue in D-sharp minor (its companion Prelude is in E-flat minor).

Does the notation of an enharmonic work matter? To the listener it could not possibly make a difference. But to the performer it can. I know this because I have experienced this fugue in both of its guises. I learned it first from the old Peters Edition in which the editor chose to recast it in E-flat minor. Later I relearned it in Bach's key of D-sharp.

Try this: listen to the second development where the subject is transformed by melodic inversion. See how the first entrance begins in G-flat major? Now close your eyes, and rehear the passage in F-sharp. To my ear, F-sharp is brighter than G-flat. This may be aural voodoo, but conceptualizing this passage in F-sharp allowed me to begin this critical entrance with a brighter tone color than I would have chosen for G-flat major.

Thus circuitously, or fugally, I have arrived at my main point: this fugue requires the performer to understand the parallel architecture that Bach has created. The exposition and first development form a single unit. In fact, the first entrance of this development (bars 12-15) seems redundant to the exposition. It is the bass voice answering its own statement of the subject in bar 8.

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So I would interpret the first large section as including the redundant entry, a modulating episode (bars 15-19), a canon of two voices (19-22), and a canon of three voices where one has been rhythmically altered (24-27) (the bass voice here wanders away from the canon, but the proliferation of false entrances in this fugue makes us hear this one as a canonic voice). There is a final two-part canon at the fifth (27-29) that cadences directly into my next big section.

What Dr. Smith has represented as second and third developments, I hear as the second large unit. This unit begins with an exposition in inversion, and a similar canon. The three-part canon of both the original and inverted subjects (bars 52-55) sums up the action to this point.

I hear the third unit as beginning in bar 62. Here the subject is presented in all three voices simultaneously. This section could be heard, on a large scale, as another exposition where the subject has been augmented--Dostoevsky's three brothers talking at the same time but perhaps not hearing each other.

These three large sections are each approximately thirty measures long. Each one, as Tim Smith points out, has its own point of view. I have chosen to use the piano's tonal palette to characterize these points of view. The beginning of each section must at least establish a new tone even if it is not maintained through the rest of the section.

Since I've chosen to articulate the fugue in a legato, gradation of tone color is the only resource left to reveal its structure. For a fascinating contrast, especially as it pertains to articulation, listen to Mozart's arrangement of this fugue for string trio. Here Mozart transposed the fugue to the friendlier key of D minor. If you are fortunate enough to find a recording of this transcription, you will agree with me that the key really does matter!