

Performing Fugue No. 13

F-Sharp Major

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 13, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

Do I have a favorite fugue in the first book? This question is always tentatively asked, but even more so answered. My mind changes! But at the moment of this writing, I do. My favorite is this fugue, the one in F-sharp major. Is this because it is more perfect than the others? Probably not. Can I play it well enough to reflect every diamond facet of its beauty? Probably not. Is there something special about the sound of this fugue on the piano? Absolutely!

One of the remarkable (and perhaps obvious) characteristics of the *WTC* is that Bach's plan of including all the chromatic keys gave him the opportunity to explore relationships between keys and affect. Although the equal temperament of the modern piano reduces the color distinctions between keys more so than the well-tempered system that Bach was promoting, there remains a tremendous difference between F-sharp major and F major, or D-sharp minor and D minor. It is not just my ear that hears this; Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven all agreed that these distinctions could be made.

F-sharp major is a special key, rarely but memorably used in such works as Beethoven's Piano Sonata, op. 78; Chopin's *Barcarolle*; and Faure's *Ballade*. This fugue would head that list (whereas the example in Book II, a bumptious Gavotte, would not).

Bach captures something intrinsic to F-sharp major in the flowing contour of the subject with its perfectly placed cadential trill, and in the rocking repetitions of the three-part invention idea. The combination of key and fugue captures

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peacefulness like that of a lake rather than a brook (*Bach*). There is also a centeredness that is appropriate to the fugue's place in the middle of the Book I. The fugue's peace and centeredness are a soothing balm after the dragon-chromaticism of the F-minor fugue that precedes it.

The atmosphere of this fugue is inherent to the symmetries of its musical ideas: the contour of the subject's second half is the retrograde-inversion of its first half. The four pitches of the invention motive are symmetrical in a more compact way.

Bach's choice of registration is, like the key itself, out of the ordinary. He has distributed the voices as if in a trio sonata, with the soprano and alto sharing the same tessitura and contrapuntally interactive. The bass is quite independent of these--almost like a continuo part.

Study the sequence in bars 23-25 and you will hear what I mean about the trio sonata texture. Those two upper voices have a crystalline quality that is utterly disarming. On the piano, these should be played with just a touch of pedal to set the strings vibrating sympathetically. I could play this one hundreds of times and never tire of it. In each repetition I would strive to perfect what is already perfection.