Fugue No. 24

B minor
Well-Tempered Clavier Book I
Johann Sebastian Bach

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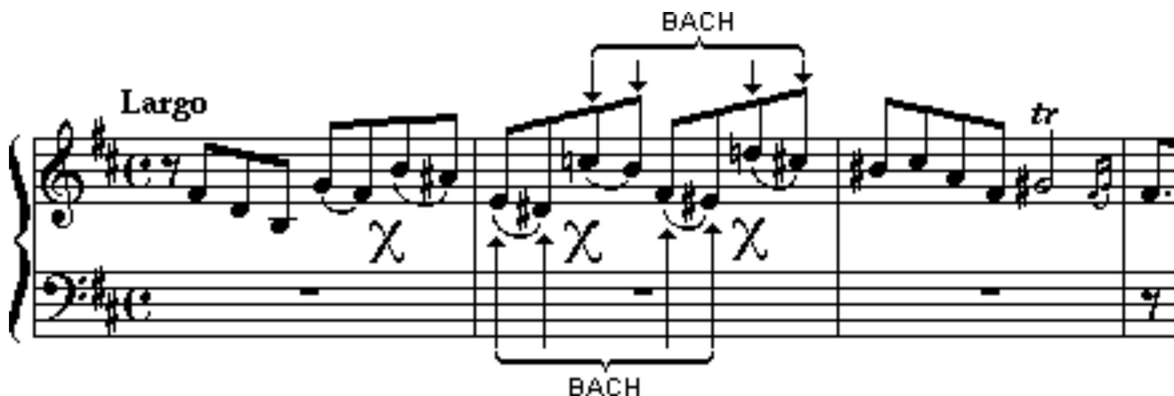

Subject: Fugue No. 24, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

> Side by side with the necessary dialogue will you almost always find another dialogue that seems superfluous; but examine it carefully, and it will be borne home to you that this is the only one that the soul can listen to profoundly, for here alone is it the soul that is being addressed.
>
> Maurice Maeterlinck
> *The Treasure of the Humble,* 1916

Meaning for Maeterlinck was found not in words, but in the symbolic subtexts they create. For this reason he was known as a symbolist. Bach was also a master of symbols. Consider now the meaning of this fugue as found in its transcendent subject, intertextual relationships, authorial inclusion, and linked prelude. In the spirit of Maeterlinck, I shall conclude with some thoughts on the object of the thirsty soul.

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Transcendent Subject

This subject uses all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. There could be no more fitting conclusion to the first cycle through twelve major and twelve minor keys. Here Bach has in a special way fulfilled the promise of his preface: to write *durch alle Tone und Semitonia* (through all the tones and semitones). It is one thing to write a fugue on each tone, but quite another to write one that uses every tone. Such a work obliterates the archaisms of meantone and proves the superiority of the wohltemperirt system.

But chromaticism alone is not what makes this fugue great. To be sure, it enables the fugue to transcend the expressive limitations of the diatonic system. But I hope to show how the fugue is metaphysically transcendent; it represents something of God, something not subject to the limitations of the material universe.

It is notable that the most chromatic of subjects in the 48 is reserved for the key of B minor. The convergence of chromaticism with key is not an accident of the cycle's alphabetical order. It reveals Bach's strong attachment to that key as he conceived it to emote, in Ledbetter's words, "the fullness of human suffering."[2] From other works, most notably the *Mass in B Minor,* Ledbetter concludes that Bach associated this key with Christ's passion: "there is no denying Bach's deeply symbolic use of B minor in his music generally, and in this prelude and fugue particularly."[3]

It should not surprise us therefore that the B minor subject contains three crosses.[4] This mannered metaphor was stock in trade for sacred music of the period. Also called *chiasmus* from the Greek letter *Chi* (χ), the motive was associated with two ideas: Christ and his cross (with χ being the first letter in the Greek spelling of Christ, and graphically in the form of a cross). The subject is, in Ledbetter's conception, "surely Bach's most elaborate use of the device of *chiasmus,* with every four quavers of the 'sigh' motif forming the cross shape."[5]

So the literal subject with its three crosses in B minor reveals what Maeterlinck called "another dialogue." This fugue is a musical representation of Golgotha, its true "subject." Like that of Lucas Cranach the Elder's painting to the right, it is an ancient subject passionately articulated by St. Paul to the Corinthians: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

In words like these we come to understand the centrality of the cross in Christian belief. In music like this we understand why Bach is known as the

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[2] David Ledbetter, *Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier the 48 Preludes and Fugues* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 228

[3] *Ibid.,* 228.

[4] The subject of this fugue contains more augmented and diminished intervals than the others. M. 2 presents two of the cycle's three intervals of the diminished 7th. Bach's student Kirnberger identified the sighing semitones of this particular fugue as word paintings of despair. The author has taken the view that this is the second of three "passion fugues" in the *Well-Tempered Clavier.* The others (c#m Book I and f#m Book II) also employ chiastic subjects and Bach's private symbols for himself and his belief.

[5] Ledbetter, 232.

supreme composer of the Christian cross. This prelude and fugue are the songs for which the divine George Herbert longed:

> Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
>   With all thy art.
> The cross taught all wood to resound
>   His Name,
> Who bore the same.
> His stretchéd sinews taught all strings what key
> Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Intertextual Relationships

If Bach's fugue and Cranach's painting are *texts,* then *intertextuality* has to do with how they are related to each other. The most obvious connection is that they have the same subject: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. To give you an idea of the connotations that this fugue might have given to audiences of Bach's day, I shall describe the impressions that Cranach's painting gave to me one summer day in 1997.

But first you may be wondering why we are comparing this fugue to this particular painting. The reason is that Bach undoubtedly saw it many times. For a hundred years prior to his sojourns in Weimar the painting had hung in that city's Church of St. Peter and St. Paul. Although Bach was employed by the local Duke, he undoubtedly played at the church from time to time. I shall assume that the painting would have impressed him, a more studied theologian than I, in the same way that it impressed me on that summer day.

How well I remember the first time that I saw this painting. Upon entry into the church it took a few seconds for my eyes to become accustomed to the dark. First I saw an elderly couple in reverent contemplation from one of the rear pews. Then my eyes moved toward the chancel and beyond, to the altar and the painting itself. While I had read of this painting, I was startled by its size. It covered the whole of the wall behind the altar. The crucified Christ was larger than life.

My eyes were immediately drawn to the face of Jesus, bloodied by the crown of thorns pressed into his forehead by the Roman soldiers. His skin is pale as the life's blood drains from his wounded side. I saw his taut sinews and his hands nailed to the transverse beam and feet to the stake of the cross.

At the center of the painting, far in the distance, I saw the small figure of Adam, hands upraised in flight as he is expelled from the Garden of Eden. His banishment is for having eaten of the forbidden fruit; a disobedience that God had said would bring upon him certain death. Satan, in the voice of a snake, had beguiled him: "You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" Genesis 3. This reminded me of Jesus, the second Adam, whose death atoned for the first Adam's sin.

Following the scene to the bottom and left, I saw the risen Lord standing before the open tomb. This is the Lord of Easter, javelin in hand, vanquishing the

foes of death and hell. At the foot of the cross I saw a lamb, which reminded me of John the Baptist's words: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" John 1:29.

Then I saw the stream of blood arcing from the Savior's side toward three figures at the bottom right. Before reaching them, the blood passes through a group of ancient people, far distant, who I recognized to be the Israelites dying of snakebites on the Sinai. Christ's blood passes through a serpent that Moses holds, by God's command, high upon a pole. Those who look away from the serpent are dying, while those who look toward it are being raised from their sickbeds. This reminded me of Jesus' words to his disciples, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" John 3:14-15.

I realized that, in linking the snakes of Eden and Sinai with Christ on the cross, Cranach had created a sermon in color. His subject was St. Paul's: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Then my eyes fell upon the three figures themselves. The one to the left I recognized to be Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Except for his red beard, the Baptist's features are remarkably similar to those of the crucified to whom he points. It appears as if John is speaking to the man in the middle. I could almost hear him cry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near; prepare the way for the Lord" Matthew 3:2-3.

As for the rotund man in black, this is Martin Luther. He points not to Christ, but to his newly completed German translation of the Bible. The passage is I John 1:7: "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

Authorial Inclusion

And what of the figure in the middle--the gentleman with piously folded hands whose eyes, intensely focused upon us, invite more serious contemplation of the dramatic and richly symbolic scene in which he stands? This is Lucas Cranach himself!

By painting himself into the picture Cranach has implied: "I was with Adam in his disobedience, bitten by original sin and continuing in rebellion like that of Israel on the Sinai. But I like them shall be saved by faith; Scripture has assured me that the blood of Jesus has washed away my sin. My hope is in the risen Lord; I put my faith in him and trust that he will raise my body from the grave."

So we have arrived at the nexus of fugue and painting. Incredibly Bach too has painted himself into the picture. Every other pair of semitones in m. 2 spells his name in tones! We hear this because the subject contains a *compound melody.* The bottom melody sounds a lower Bach and the top melody an upper Bach, each spelling a transposition of his musical signature. [If you wish to know more about this fascinating subject read the commentary on the c-sharp minor fugue.]

Significantly the subject is stated thirteen times. In sacred art of the period this foreboding number, representing betrayal, is often associated with the crucifixion. This is because Judas, the traitor, was the thirteenth member of the

little band (Jesus and his twelve disciples).

Were the subject to have sounded BACH with its echo thirteen times, the composer would have signed his name twenty-six times, right? But the D Major statement (m. 48) alters the echo so that BACH is heard only once. Accordingly the composer has actually named himself twenty-five times. This number represents the perfection (5x5) of Jesus' passion.

With nails in his hands and feet, and spear in his side, Jesus endured five wounds. The number five is therefore identified with *stigmata.* Like the number thirteen, five is also associated with artistic renditions of the crucifixion. There are five figures in the painting to the right. The squaring of this number in the fugue represents, in addition to the fullness of Christ's suffering, the artist's complete identification with it.

Stigmata are also prominent in the countersubject (high voice) where they are heard as five descending quarter notes. These five, always in direct counterpoint with Bach's name, reinforce the pathos of the artist's presence with Jesus in his hour of humiliation. I have marked these episodes on the timeline in black dots.

Bach's inclusion of himself in the subject implies another dialogue. It is that of the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus. The first thief hurled insults: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him: "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." The second thief then turned and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Like at Golgotha, there are three crosses in Bach's subject. It intrigues me that Bach has identified himself not with the first, but with the second and third. One wonders: has he attached his name not to the mocker, but to Jesus and the believing sinner? Has the composer in this way expressed belief and a hope to dwell in paradise? I don't know the answer to these questions, but think them interesting enough to have asked.

Linked Prelude

A fascinating dimension of this fugue can be heard in its links to the prelude. While such connections are not uncommon in the *Well-Tempered Clavier,* in this case they contain symbols that ought to be more fully explored. To that end Dr. Korevaar has graciously offered to include the prelude in this study.

The B-minor prelude is the only example of a *binary* in Book I. The form has two sections of near equal length and requires the keyboardist to ornament them in the repeats. You should listen to it now in its entirety to appreciate how beautifully the artist has fulfilled this expectation.

Structurally the prelude is significant for its embryonic statements of music that prefigure the fugue. The more important of these are mm. 25-26 (prelude), which are fully developed in the modulating sequences of mm. 17-20 and 26-29 in the fugue's first development. These episodes, two of the more tender

moments in the *Well-Tempered Clavier,* beautifully connect the paired works.[6] But, more than connection, these episodes comprise one of the most theological "moments" in all of Bach's music. Here, in double counterpoint, the composer has again painted Golgotha and the Christian hope of resurrection.[7]

As in the fugue, Bach has used the prelude to reference Christ's passion. The most obvious connotation is heard in the first five pitches of the soprano--a quotation of the passion chorale *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* (O Head so bloodied by wounds) heard five times in the *St. Matthew Passion.* The second half of the prelude develops this melody in diminution.

According to Ledbetter, the walking bass, with its suspensions in the upper voices *(durezze e ligature style),* was associated with 18th century Catholic music.[8] Bach's most elaborate use of *durezze e ligature* was in the *Confiteor* of his *Mass in B Minor:* "I confess one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

Object of the Thirsty Soul

It may seem odd that I should have quoted the profound atheist, Maeterlinck, in preface to the discussion of so profoundly theistic, and Christian, a work as this. Maeterlinck himself would not have thought it odd. He would have conceded God, in whom he did not believe, at least to be a player in the dialogue of those who do.

Maeterlinck was a playwright and poet, Bach a composer and Cranach a painter. The raw materials of one were words; the others used sound and color. It was Maeterlinck's belief that these materials, these "necessary dialogues," mean little without "another dialogue" having been borne home to the soul. It is in the deeper dialogue that meaning can be found. In this analysis we have considered substrates of meaning conveyed by this fugue. This required us to start with structure, but not to stop there.

While the meaning of this fugue presupposes a crucified Christ, it can be appreciated by persons who, like Maeterlinck, believe in no such One. Sacred art reveals the thirst of every soul to transcend circumstance, to be at peace in pain, to feel hope, to love and be loved. These desires are the motivation for all we know. They are preternatural in origin and universal in scope.

In atheistic traditions the object of the thirsty soul is to know one's self (Socrates) or the denial of self in acts of altruism or the contemplation of impermanence (Buddhism). For some it is a thirst for beauty in art, or the grace of a noble heart. Maeterlinck wrote, "Nothing in the whole world is so athirst for

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[6] In the *St. Matthew Passion,* after Judas betrays Christ, who is then bound and led away by soldiers, Bach had employed the same counterpoint as mm. 25-26 of this prelude and mm. 17-20 and 26-29 of this fugue. The progenitor was composed for two sopranos, in canonic imitation, on the word *gefangen* (captured or imprisoned), to which the chorus responds *bindet nicht!* (Don't bind him). See *St. Matthew* No. 27a, mm. 21-22.

[7] David Yearsley's *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) posits that composers of this era conceived a theological significance in contrapuntal inversion. To Bach, the re-birth of old ideas in double counterpoint adumbrated the believer's (hence his own) resurrection.

[8] Ledbetter, 229.

beauty as the soul, nor is there anything to which beauty clings so readily" *(The Inner Beauty,* 1911).

In theistic traditions the object is God himself. In the Jewish faith the Psalmist expressed this longing: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." And Christians affirm the truth of St. Augustine: "Thou hast created us O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee." Surely every faith would have a similar expression of the quest for God.

This fugue and painting are two such expressions. How else can one explain the artists identifying themselves so *passionately* with the *passion* of Christ? The answer is found in *compassion.* All three of these words have their root in the Latin *passio,* which means "suffering." By identifying with Christ's suffering, Bach and Cranach participated vicariously in it.

In the faith culture of Bach and Cranach suffering was considered to be one way to quench the thirst of the soul. While Luther codified the doctrine in his *Theologia crucis* (theology of the cross), the teaching came from Jesus himself: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23-24).

This is a difficult teaching. It could hardly be arrived at by rational means. How can one gain his life by losing it? The answer is found on earth and in heaven. Like Mother Theresa of Calcutta, countless dedicated people have found the object of their thirsty souls in attending to the needs of the sick and destitute. Bach and Cranach satisfied their thirst by suffering with Christ in their most personal of artistic expressions. Maeterlinck too was able to assuage his thirst (here on earth) in the writing of timeless literature for which he received the Nobel Prize in 1911.

As for heaven, this was something that Maeterlinck could not quite bring himself to confess. He came close: "the soul may not rise, perhaps, but it can never sink" *(Silence,* 1911). By contrast, Bach and Cranach both affirm with Job:

I know that my Redeemer lives,
And He shall stand at last on the earth,
And after my skin is destroyed, this I know,
That in my flesh I shall see God,

This was obviously Cranach's hope. The composition of his painting says as much. We know from other sources that Bach also had the hope of eternal life. Two of the more important texts that we have in this regard are the Symbolum canon he wrote for Johann Gottlieb Fulda and his monogram, both expressive of his motto, "Christ will crown those who carry his cross." [For more on this subject study the c-sharp minor fugue.]

In conclusion, it has been my purpose to examine what Maeterlinck called the other dialogue. The American poet laureate, Robert Frost, expressed the same insight when he wrote, "Every time a poem is written, it is written not by cunning, but by belief." While we could have devoted these paragraphs entirely to musical structure, that would have gotten us only to the cunning. There is still more

cunning in this fugue that I am confident you'll figure out. But don't stop there, for there is still *more* belief.

Note on the Cranach Painting

Five years after writing the above, I learned from Rev. Paul McCain's page on this subject that there is uncertainty as to whether the painting is by Lucas Cranach "the Elder" or "the Younger." The gentleman standing between John the Baptist and Martin Luther is indeed the former, and the strongest argument for "the Elder" as the artist. However, in the carefully carved segment of bare wood beneath Jesus' feet, we discern the date 1555--two years after "the Elder's" death. Beneath that, the painter has represented the flying dragon symbol used first by Cranach the Elder, then, after his death, by "the Younger" Cranach. Accordingly we acknowledge the possibility that the painting was, if not accomplished entirely by Lucas Cranach the Younger, at least finished by him. Either way, the concept of authorial inclusion is twice amplified. In the case of both artists, their respective symbols and likenesses are portrayed as receiving the blood of Christ.