

# Fugue No. 14

F-Sharp minor

*Well-Tempered Clavier Book II*

Johann Sebastian Bach

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To read this essay in its hypermedia format, go to the Shockwave movie at <http://bach.nau.edu/clavier/nature/fugues/Fugue38.html>.



**Subject:** Fugue No. 14, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

This is the third of three passion fugues in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Because it borrows subjects from the other two, you should study them first: the c-sharp minor from Book I and the b-minor concluding that same volume. Upon return we'll discover:

- the sound of Bach's passion
- the source of his subject
- his subject's lament
- his cross and crown

## The Sound of Bach's Passion

Yesterday my daughter asked me a question. Before I tell you what she asked, it is important for you to know that she is an accomplished player of Bach's music on the viola. At the moment of her asking, I was in the process of playing and analyzing this fugue, and she had just heard it for the first time.

"Dad, can you tell, just by listening to it, if a fugue is religious."

"Yes, Sarah, but why do you ask?"

"Well, *this* one sounds religious."

Sarah's conclusion was of course correct. Before having discussed it with me, she had anticipated my analysis exactly. While much of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* sounds sacred to my ear, it contains three fugues that uniquely represent the symbols of Bach's faith. This is the third. Between the three we come to

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appreciate Bach's intense desire to carry the cross for the sake of the crown, and his passion for writing music to the glory of God. For these reasons, and because they allude to Christ's suffering, I have called them "passion fugues."

Like the first passion fugue (c#m), this one has three subjects. It is a *triple fugue*. Each subject receives its own exposition followed by development in combination with subjects prior to it. Of the triple fugues in the *WTC*, this is the definitive expression of the form. Notwithstanding its "learned" origin, it is, in Dr. Ledbetter's assessment, "one of the most satisfying fugues in the collection" (p. 295).

The argument for calling this fugue "passion music," hinges upon its having borrowed two subjects from the two most overtly sacred works in the cycle.<sup>2</sup> Because both progenitors are from Book I, future references to the bm and c#m fugues should be understood as referring to that volume. This fugue's 1st subject is derived from the bm fugue, while its 3rd subject is from the c#m.

It is likely that the composition of this great work was prompted by a challenge from Mattheson (*Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, 1739) to write a triplex fugue to be published with a generous sampling of Mattheson's own. But Bach's decision to make it, instead, the centerpiece of Book II was more than justified. How so?

In view of its quotations from Book I, publication of this fugue in Mattheson's collection would have cast doubt upon the interconnectedness of the passion fugues. Too, by placing it at the center of Book II (fugue No. 14), the composer revealed this fugue to be of private significance. It implies too personal a sentiment to have been entrusted to Mattheson. When heard as a whole, the passion fugues express Bach's belief that composition, an exercise in earthly devotion, also expresses the hope of heavenly reward. This reward, represented by a crown, is measured not in treasure, but resurrection and eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

How do we know that this was Bach's creed, and that he expressed it musically? It is a good question that deserves as good an answer. Any search for such an answer must inevitably lead to Bach's motto and monogram.

His motto, *Christus Coronabit Crucigeros*, translates "Christ will crown those who carry his cross." His monogram portrays a crown above his initials JSB and

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<sup>2</sup> Of the three passion fugues, this one unites the other two by quotation of subjects and allusion to their original keys. Whereas the bm fugue had stated its subject once in f# (the key of this fugue), the present work's two subdominant modulations (m. 28 and m. 51) return it to the key of its origin (subject of the bm fugue). Likewise, the three modulations to c# allude to the second of its two ancestors. Curiously, the earlier works are a perfect fifth *higher* (c#m), and *lower* (bm) than the present fugue.

<sup>3</sup> In the source literature of the 18th century, chromatic melodies, whether they be ascending or descending, were understood as rhetorical gestures in relation to words. The technique went by many names, among them, *Passus duriusculus*, which could be translated "doubly-difficult passage," or even as "harsh passage." Such passages were calculated to amplify, or paint, a text — which posits an interesting problem for the wordless *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Bach addressed the problem, directly, in his Latin notes to the *Canone doppio sopr'il Soggetto* (BWV 1077). Using that work as the touchstone, I have consistently taken the view that the *Passus duriusculus*, when found in its descending and ascending forms in the same work (as in BWV 1077), is Bach's symbol for the cross and crown.

horizontal mirror BSJ. The mirror yields the Greek letter *Chi* ( $\chi$ ), the first letter in the spelling of “Christ,” and a representation of a cross. In this manner Bach portrays himself as both crossbearer, and one who hopes to wear the crown.

That Bach conceived a *musical* expression of his motto and monogram is revealed by a canon (BWV 1077) where we discover the composer’s motto scribed beneath. It is a canon in contrary motion; the follower voice is generated from the leader’s by *reversing* the direction of its intervals. Because this canon was written for J. G. Fulda, I shall call it the “Fulda canon.”

How does the Fulda canon express Bach’s motto? Its leader employs a *lamento*, the chromatic *descent* of the tetrachord, transformed by melodic inversion into a chromatic *ascent* in the follower. The unique combination of motto with music reveals Bach’s practice of symbolizing theological truth by means of contrapuntal technique. If the lament represents Christ’s passion, then its inversion represents the crown that awaits those who share it. These symbols are reinforced by invertible counterpoint, where voices exchange registers.

Connection of the “crossed” voices yields  $\chi$ , the letter *Chi*.

If *Chi* looks like a cross, it also sounds like one. The musical expression of  $\chi$  employs the following contour: falling step, rising skip, falling step. The chiasmic melody can also be retrograded, rising step, falling skip, rising step (with inversion yielding the same result). Of critical importance to this study, Bach’s name in tones (Bb-A-C-B or its transpositions) is a chiasmic melody. As you follow this discussion, remember that the words *cruciform*, *chiasmus* and *chiasmic* are derivatives of *Chi*, which is the twenty-second letter of the Greek alphabet, and an early Christian symbol for Christ and his cross.

### **The Source of His Subject**

How does this fugue sound Bach’s passion? It does it by the shapes, allusions, and intertextual connotations of its subjects. The 1st subject begins with a descending arpeggiation of an f#m triad. This motive is sufficient to recall the first three pitches of the bm subject. But, continuing through the next six, the similarity is undeniable. For this comparison I’ve selected a portion of the bm fugue that is in the same key:

bm subject: first eight pitches (low voice)  
subject of this fugue: first nine pitches

Since the current work develops an idea born of the bm fugue, we should wonder if the two are affectively related. Recall that the earlier fugue’s association with passion music was implied by its chiasmic subject, which contained three crosses composing a compound melody, where Bach’s name was heard twice. The primary allusion to the cross, in the current fugue, is reserved for its 3rd subject, which we shall consider in more detail at the appropriate moment.

Before leaving the *bm* fugue, you have reminded me that its prelude evoked another passion theme in its quotation and development of the chorale *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*. The fugue that we are now studying also quotes this chorale: first in m. 8 (low voice), and again in m. 59 (middle voice).

Let us review. This fugue borrows its primary subject from the *bm* fugue of Book I. It also quotes, as did the prelude to the *bm* fugue, the passion chorale *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*. Next we'll consider similarities between this fugue and the *c#m* of Book I.

### **His Subject's Lament**

In the 18th century, melodies descending by half step — *lamenti* — expressed sorrow. David Ledbetter has written (p. 81) that Bach employed this most prosaic of Baroque formulae, in such a way as to produce “a strong element of personal expression.” In one of the best examples from the *WTC*, the *c#m* fugue features a lament that is heard not once, but twice. Its association with a cruciform subject reveals the reason for lamentation — the crucifixion of Christ. This interpretation is confirmed by Fulda's canon and numerous choral works.

Listen again to the laments from the *c#m* fugue and compare them with this fugue's double exposition. Would you agree that they produce the same affect?

*c#m* fugue: 1st lament, 2nd lament  
this fugue: double exposition

Each passage is drenched with chromaticism and falling steps. The double exposition resembles the laments in one more respect; all three indulge in a bit of rule breaking: non-resolution of their leading tones. This technique, known in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as “*inganno*,” takes license with a custom that inflected pitches should resolve in the direction of their inflection. Incidental sharps should resolve up, and flats down.

Study the score of mm. 21-23. Can you find the uncharacteristic *downward* resolutions of *upwardly* inflected pitches? While these sharped pitches are temporarily resolved, they immediately return, apparently not to resolve at all. For the time being they are left in limbo. The result is startling, but effective — an affectation of *pathos* more distressed than the common idiom.

While the passages are different, the double exposition expresses the same *Affekt* as a *lamento*. Sadness. It is a sadness not to be resolved until *after* the crown. In the counterexposition Bach would have us revisit the 2nd subject, this time without *inganno*. The lament finally resolves.

### **His Cross and Crown**

The 3rd subject has provoked more unanswered questions than any in the *WTC*. Let us approach it in two ways: as music and symbol. It is first and foremost a musical event, the product of a technique known as *obligo*, where a non-modulating motive is repeated in sequence.

Although *oblighi* need *not* have been derived from the main subject, in the case of the *c#m* fugue there is a rather striking connection: the *c#m* subject

yielded this *obligo* (high voice). Both motives shared a chiastic contour. There is no resemblance, however, between the subject of the present fugue and its *obligo*. But a comparison of the c#m *obligo* with that of the current fugue reveals something that is, by anyone's measure, amazing:

c#m: 2nd subject  
this fugue: 3rd subject

They are quite remarkably alike! The implication is that there is much more to the 3rd subject of this fugue than compositional technique. It is a symbol. But a symbol for what?

Before answering that question, are you not struck by the rarity of this? In no other fugue has Bach used *the same* subject. Why has he repeated that idea (c#m fugue) in this fugue? Do you think it plausible that his purpose was to employ music in the interest of symbol?

So, what is the symbol? The answer is found in the c#m fugue. Remember that, in three places, its *obligo* incorporated Bach's musical signature. Not only so, but it was heard in 14 episodes ( $B+A+C+H = 14$ ) containing 41 crosses ( $J+S+B+A+C+H = 41$ ). Thus, in three ways, Bach "composed himself" into that fugue. So, in answer to the question, the *oblighi* of *both* fugues represent Bach himself. But they also represent the Christian cross. Remember that the c#m subject and its *obligo* were chiastic — symbolic of the cross.

If you have been persuaded by these arguments, then we agree that the 3rd subject of this fugue represents the composer, the cross, and (as we shall see) the crown. While the symbols are the same, the fugues are different. So I must explain how the borrowing is worked out in this fugue.

Unlike the c#m fugue, Bach has not signed his musical signature in the present one. But the 3rd subject does indeed weave itself into the fabric of this fugue (as it had in the c#m) in 14 strands. Counting on the timeline, the diagonals represent all instances of motor rhythm, with the portions in red representing the 3rd subject. There are fourteen.

Recall that in the former work the *Chi* symbol for the cross was tumbled from Bach's monogram 41 times. In this fugue it happens 29 times. This number requires explanation. First, I am not counting just the four pitches of the *obligo's* cross idea, but all eight sixteenth notes of the 3rd subject when heard without variation to their initial contour. You may conclude that I have quibbled here; because the entry of m. 47 contains a minute variation, I have not counted it.

"But what," you ask, "is the significance of 29 tumbling  $\chi$ 's?" Before replying to that question, we seem to have forgotten about the crown — the most amazing passage in this fugue!

To understand how Bach has symbolized the crown, we must return to Fulda's canon. If that canon lamented, it also rejoiced in the turning of death to resurrection. The technique was melodic inversion, where the *descending* chromatics of the leader voice were made, by the follower, to *ascend*. As expressed in this fugue, it seems as if its 3rd subject exists for one reason: to build to this moment. Fulda's canon allows us to interpret this transformation,

wherever it is heard in Bach's music, as a symbol for the crown that Christ offers to those who carry his cross: *Christus Coronabit Crucigeros*.

So where, exactly, are "crowns" heard in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*? Most significantly, they are heard in the c#m fugue and the one we are studying now.<sup>4</sup>

Crown of the c#m fugue: (low voice)

Crown of this fugue (middle and low voices)

In the earlier work the crown was heard on the strong beats of mm. 41-43. It was produced by the inversion of the 2nd subject with numerous chromatic inflections. It is worth noting that the crown's chromatic outline was heard in spite of many intervening pitches.

The present fugue contains the most elaborate crown of any in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. You will quickly hear that mm. 47-48 intertwine two crowns: one in the middle voice and the other in the low. These are heard as syncopations of parallel sixths ascending chromatically through the tetrachords above and below f-sharp, an amazing passage that yields eleven or twelve pitches in the chromatic scale! If rising chromatics express the hope of resurrection and eternal life, Bach's yearning must have been intense.

Whereas the crown of the c#m fugue was the melodic inversion of its 2nd subject, the crown of this fugue is more elaborate. Its chromatics (lower two voices) are not the voice of its subject, but of free counterpoint. The melodic inversion of the subject is indeed found, in the high voice, but without chromatics.

In conclusion, as we have remembered to discuss the crown, I shall fulfill my promise to tell you about the letter  $\chi$  emanating from Bach's monogram. Why are there 29? Perhaps you would like to figure this one out for yourself. Assign each letter of the alphabet a number: A=1, B=2, C=3, etc. Do as the Germans and count the letters J and I both as 9. Now find the sum of Johann Sebastian Bach's initials. If that is not enough, 29 also sums up the initials in his signature reason for composition: *Soli Deo Gloria!*

S.D.G.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ledbetter alludes (p. 81) to two more instances of rising chromatic tetrachords, each given to "the most subtle personal expression." The first is found in the subject of this fugue's counterpart: f#m of Book I. The second is in the countersubject of the d#m fugue of Book II. In consideration of Fulda's canon, and in light of the present work, the foregoing fugues could be similarly interpreted.