Performing Fugue No. 17
A-Flat Major
*Well-Tempered Clavier Book II*
Johann Sebastian Bach

© 2006 David Korevaar (the author)¹

To read this essay in its hypermedia format, go to the Shockwave movie at [http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/ii17.html](http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/ii17.html).

Subject & Countersubject: Fugue No. 17, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

As he seems to quite often in Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Bach poses a tricky question of affect in the A-flat fugue.² The subject displays a series of upward-moving fourths, an interval redolent of life, triumph, and joy, both as leaps and as filled-in scales. The countersubject, on the other hand, begins with a slow-moving descending chromatic line (through a fourth – no coincidence) before recovering with a rather jaunty syncopated upward leap. The descending chromatic line from scale degree 1 to scale degree 5 is the standard signal for a lament – not at all the atmosphere promised in the subject! While this conflict is obvious when you hear the subject and countersubject separately, the result when they are joined is initially mostly joyful – the darkness implicit in the countersubject doesn’t become explicit until a little later in the

¹ You may print, copy, link to, or cite this document, for non-profit educational purposes, so long as credit is given to the author as per fair use. You may not reproduce this document electronically, enfold it into a web site, or incorporate it into a saleable product without written permission from the author.

² For example, the B-minor fugue in the 2nd book, a *passepied*, directly parodies the ultra-serious B-minor fugue of the 1st book. The G-sharp minor fugue is a complete conundrum: is it a *gigue*? Or is it a lament?
fugue. By the end, the conflict is obvious enough – especially in the surprising and dramatic pre-dominant Neapolitan harmony of measure 45. [Some investigation of the proportion of minor inflection in this major-key piece could be fruitful – is the placement of more and longer minor-key sections in the last third of the piece related to the placement of the minor inflection two-thirds of the way through the subject (as in m. 4, beat 2; m. 7, beat 2, etc.)?]

The idea of mixing light and dark colors in painting is known as *chiaroscuro*; the term is also often applied to music. Of course, the official word is that in the Baroque period single movements are characterized by a single affect. Unofficially, *chiaroscuro* is real in Bach’s music, and its greater presence in the second book of the *WTC* than in the first supports my feeling that the second book is more forward-looking (i.e., pre-Classical) in its style choices than the first. As a performer, I’m concerned with how to show this mix of affect effectively but unobtrusively. That is, I want the tone color and sense of timing to reflect the affective implications of the local harmony, but not to interrupt the overall flow of the piece.

To pick a spot to illustrate this discussion, I’ll start with the F-minor subject entrance in mm. 24-25, alto. This entrance begins in a dark tonal region, but by its end arrives at an almost jaunty turn into the sequence of m. 26. By the middle of m. 27, a new sequence begins from C minor, with fragments of descending chromatic bass darkening the affect again, and pulling the piece ultimately to an entrance in the downright grim key of E-flat minor (mm. 32-33). The thick writing of the upper two voices (in a low register in parallel thirds) is combined with heavy modal inflections (oscillating between D and D-flat) in the alto voice. From here to the end of the fugue, Bach seems to engage in an affective tug-of-war. The D-flat major entrance in mm. 37-38 gives up its cheerfulness with the F-flat inflection in its tail. Each subsequent entrance makes an attempt at evading the inevitable descent to the aforementioned Neapolitan.

All of this description means nothing without an emotional response. I’ve purposely used rather loaded language here to make a point: the affect is intrinsic in the notes themselves. Because of the mixed affect, the tempo can be neither very fast nor very slow; and the color palette and subtle rubato used to emphasize the *chiaroscuro* effect must be constantly deployed. Whether this deployment is intuitive or the result of analysis I won’t even begin to determine, even in my own case!