

## Bach's most-played piece:

### Prelude One of the Well-tempered Clavier – in context.

For today's pianists (and others), J. S. Bach's best-known piece is the opening prelude of the Well-tempered Clavier. Bach would be gratified to learn that after three hundred years it is still offered to countless young students, making it his most performed piece too. But how often do teachers discuss the meaning of Bach's title?

#### ILLUS.1. Line one of Prelude I in c



Bach's title *The Well-tempered Clavier* referred to two things. We can translate his word 'clavier' as 'keyboard'. This referred to the keyboard instruments current in Bach's day: organ, harpsichord, clavichord, fortepiano, and several others now hardly known. *Clavier* also referred to the keyboard itself, with (in his case) usually just four octaves, each containing twelve semitones – seven falling on 'natural' keys, and five on sharps or flats.

As for the term *Well-tempered*, this referred to a new style of keyboard-tuning, which allowed Bach to compose, and others to play in all the keys, without retuning their instrument. This development began to preoccupy musicians at the time that Bach was growing up.

The tuning system which had been in general use for a century before Bach conceived the first book of the '48', was Meantone, in which a number of pure thirds produced rich sonorities in some half-dozen major keys, but unpleasant discord in the more remote ones: this did not allow much modulation, but before 1700 this generally did not matter. Bach was still in his teens at the start of the eighteenth century, when he met systems devised by Andreas Werckmeister, which were modifications of meantone. We cannot be sure what his preferred tuning method was in 1722 (the completion date for Book I), but it wasn't meantone, nor was it equal temperament, the system used for pianos today. It was a 'well-tempered', not equal-tempered system, where it was possible to play in all the keys, but the unequal tuning gave those keys different qualities. Some were 'bright', others 'dark', for example. It is likely that Bach's own system gave the key of c major the richest tuning of all the keys, and it may even have kept the third c-e as a pure interval. The fact that Bach chose to start the first prelude with middle c, and to build upon it a chord of c major, shows him rooted in traditional thought and practice. To demonstrate the potential of a more modern, more flexible tuning, he began with this established point of departure. Even today most people use middle c as their central point of reference.

In fact, players who still tuned meantone from habit, would have found no real problems when playing Prelude I and its fugue. Their downfall would have occurred later: some doubtful harmonies in the prelude and fugue in c minor would perhaps have led them to retune g sharps to give a flats. But from the start of the next prelude – in c sharp major, meantone would have produced catastrophic disharmony. Bach's new-style tuning allowed players to meet, early on – and enjoy playing – a complete prelude and fugue in the remote key of c sharp major, which would have been an exciting, challenging experience.

For Bach, there were other advantages to beginning this mighty work in the key of c major. The unequal nature of Bach's tuning encouraged the concept of 'key character'. Different keys conveyed different moods. C major was described by Bach's German contemporary Johann Mattheson amongst many others, as conveying simplicity, purity, resolution, and confidence. This is a natural mood in which to set out on the journey through the Well-tempered Clavier – even today, when the idea of keys possessing individual characters is almost, but not quite obsolete.

### **Arpeggiated chords and their notation**

Having decided to begin with middle c, Bach constructed the first prelude very simply, from a succession of broken chords, in the form of upward-moving arpeggios, and made these almost as basic as possible. Even more rudimentary would have been the use of six notes, with each hand playing a triad: c, e, g, with the right hand an octave higher than the left. He omitted the top note, letting the left hand play the two bottom notes rather than three, and the right hand shifted downwards by one inversion, making the top note e rather than g.

In the score the two notes in the left hand are written to be sustained until the next bass note is played (at least in Bach's final version, which we use). The right-hand plays semiquavers, with no indication that they are to be held. Today, this brings very different responses among performers and scholars. Some take a literal approach, and play the right-hand groups detached or quite dry. Others prefer more legato. Bach's instruments had no sustaining pedal, and if today's pianists choose to use it, great care is required. Nevertheless, even if the pedal is avoided, there are arguments against a literal, exact approach to Bach's note-values. For Bach and his students, a tradition of 'preluding' was very old: the art of exploring, and exploiting, the sound of the instrument. There are parallels in similar material written as much as a century earlier for plucked instruments, like the theorbo, where the duration of the notes was defined not by notation, nor by the player's technique, but simply by the nature of the instrument's sustaining power: on a lute or theorbo the player did not terminate the sound by damping. Bach inherited this tradition, of broken chords being sustained in a natural flowing manner. He owned several Lute-harpsichords, which imitated the theorbo or lute and had no dampers. On these instruments this entire question would have disappeared: a degree of continuous legato was guaranteed.

A player of a ‘normal’ harpsichord, clavichord, or fortepiano though, would use a prelude – a composition like this or one improvised on the spot – to find out how beautiful (or otherwise!) the instrument sounded, and how the action responded to touch. Holding the notes within the broken chords of such a piece, however they were written, was normal and expected. This first prelude develops the skill of playing varying degrees of legato with the fingers alone, using a sequence of arpeggios to produce a beautiful and even sound.

Bach had extreme feelings about consistency and purity in musical notation. Had he indicated clearly (by the use of ties, note values, or even slurs) that he wanted over-holding in the right hand, he would have felt compelled to do so through the whole piece. Apart from being over-elaborate and unsightly, such a prescriptive score would have restricted expressive opportunities. It would have been ‘un-Baroque’. A performer today who chooses to ignore the literal meaning of Bach’s score, can feel entirely justified.

### **Continuo realisation**

Improvisation of a right-hand part over a given bass was the core of Bach’s teaching, and of Baroque keyboard-playing in general. The preludes of the Well-tempered Clavier show how Baroque music was conceived from the bass upwards. The first four bars of prelude I, indeed, may be a gentle joke on Bach’s part. In terms of elementary continuo playing, they present the first harmonic progression which a beginner might have met as a child: over the four bass notes c, c, b, and c, the harmonies offer (for the implied figured bass): 5:3, 4:2, 6:5, and back to 5:3.

### **ILLUS. 2. Chords over these four bass notes, with figures**



There are, of course, infinite figurations which could be played over the bass of this piece. As we have it, the prelude stipulates just one. But we can imagine Bach the teacher, encouraging his pupils (over his working life he had at least a hundred good students) to offer alternatives. We know (and how surprising it is!) that he asked them to do so, even to some of his more ‘finished’ music.

Beyond the simple choice between playing the right hand legato, or not, lies a whole series of possible choices. The player can subtly vary these to draw attention to harmonic shifts, or to give more apparent weight to one arpeggiated chord over another. A feature of the harpsichord is that two or more notes sounded at the same time, sound louder than one, so that a greater use of legato – where it is applied – will lead to more sound. One can, for example, emphasise the first chord in each bar over the second, making the second be an echo of the

first, rather than just a repeat. Pianists might use dynamic control through touch to achieve something similar.

The element of Baroque musical composition and performance known as ‘beat hierarchy’ supports this idea. In the C (4/4) time signature of prelude I, the first beat is the most important; the second most important is the third, which occurs at the halfway point of each bar. If the second half of each bar is given the same weight as the first, this natural, effective skeletal structure disappears: one bar becomes, in effect, two bars of 2/4. The player loses the expressive potential of giving equal or even greater weight to the second half of a bar, or bars, to increase tension before a point of particular interest, such as a change of key or the closing line.

Some players stress the second note of each group rather than the first. In the first chord, this is the e, a third above middle c. The stress is thereby transferred from the bass to a harmony note. Importantly, had Bach wanted this, he would have written the first note, c, as a leading note, preceding a naturally strong beat. If we look at the last line of the piece, where the broken chords give way to a different, freer use of the right hand, the music simply won’t work unless the emphasis is directed – or returned – to the beginning of each bar.

### ILLUS.3. Last line.



### Tempo

Modern musicians may feel that when the composer has given no tempo-indication, this is a matter for the player – the ‘interpreter’. The metronome was not to be invented for a hundred years, despite which, written directions for tempo, like *andante* and *allegro*, were nevertheless rare in Bach’s day. Even so, composers would feel confident that a performance would only deviate wildly from their desired tempo under the hands of a particularly wilful player, and the concept of the ‘interpreter’ was not one then recognised. The chosen combination of note value and time signature (greatly assisted when the music was clearly within a certain genre – like a dance piece) would generally ensure this. Bach tended to add a written tempo indication only rarely, generally at points where a player might otherwise make an instinctive, wrong assumption. There are several such places within the ‘48’.

The first prelude is in C (4/4), based entirely on groups of semiquavers. In most such cases, Bach would have expected a tempo not deviating greatly from *crochet* = 60, although the broken chord patterns might well suggest a rather

livelier pace than this. Anything slower would be unduly laboured. But some editions used by pianists today contain suggestions for a tempo almost twice this speed. Paradoxically, this makes the piece much easier to play!

We have now come full circle. At the start of this article, the key of c major was associated with an expected 'mood'. To convey this mood it is important to adopt an appropriate tempo.

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