



more than the score...

J. S. BACH

Prelude and Fugue in C major from *The Well-tempered Clavier*

for piano solo

Presented by Daniel Grimwood

Contents

Daniel Grimwood talks about
Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C major 2

Prelude and Fugue in C major 4

About the composer 9

About the music 9

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Daniel Grimwood

talks about

Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C major

The two large volumes that make up *The Well-tempered Clavier* were written approximately ten years apart. In these books, Bach takes us through all of the 12 keys; therefore, each of the two volumes of the '48' has 24 preludes and fugues. It was a gigantic undertaking. In the writing of this, he was, we assume, attempting to demonstrate certain points.

For many years, it was thought that *The Well-tempered Clavier* proved that Bach was a very early exponent of equal temperament. This is now known not to be the case and is considered by many musicologists to be an example of his own tuning system, where it was possible to tune the harpsichord or other keyboard instruments, not equally, but in such a way that each key area had its own identity, which he exploited for expressive reasons. Therefore, C major, which traditionally is the key of innocence, would have had a much more harmonious major third from the C to E than the third that we hear with equal temperament. If you take a look at the title page of the first edition, there is an interesting squiggle of concentric circles at the top. This has now been extrapolated by the American harpsichordist Bradley Lehman as actually being a tuning diagram.

*We simply don't
know how
musicians at the
time of Bach
would have
understood his
markings*

The history of temperament is very interesting and very complicated: in a nutshell, the older tuning systems which were unequal would mean that certain keys were attractive to the ear and usable, but the price that you paid for this was that other keys were unacceptable. For example, many composers in the generation before Bach kept themselves to the simpler keys: C major, G major, F major, A minor, E minor, D minor. This is because these were the most attractive-sounding keys.

Some of the French harpsichord composers wrote pieces in awkward keys precisely because they wanted to exploit dissonant sounds. So the extreme keys such as F sharp major and E flat minor were very uncomfortable to listen to, because the instruments had been tuned to make the other keys optimal.

The Prelude

With this coupling of prelude and fugue, the tempo of the prelude is given by the fugue, because there is nothing to suggest that they should be at different speeds. If we're deciding to take the fugue at a fairly flowing rate so they combine and match each other, that's the tempo decided.

Bach doesn't really give us any clues to articulation other than the fact that the two bass notes are over-held. To me, this suggests that all of the notes on the right hand should also be over-held. I say that because, when Bach copies the works of Couperin, where Couperin writes the over-holding, Bach leaves it out because he just assumes that the keyboard player would know to do it. Therefore,

Prelude in C major

from *The Well-tempered Clavier*, Book 1

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

BWV 846

Measures 1-2 of the Prelude in C major. The right hand features a continuous eighth-note pattern, while the left hand plays a simple bass line of quarter notes.

3

Measures 3-5 of the Prelude in C major. The right hand continues the eighth-note pattern, and the left hand maintains the quarter-note bass line.

6

Measures 6-8 of the Prelude in C major. The right hand continues the eighth-note pattern, and the left hand maintains the quarter-note bass line.

9

Measures 9-11 of the Prelude in C major. The right hand continues the eighth-note pattern, and the left hand maintains the quarter-note bass line.

12

Measures 12-14 of the Prelude in C major. The right hand continues the eighth-note pattern, and the left hand maintains the quarter-note bass line.

15

Measures 15-17 of the Prelude in C major. The right hand continues the eighth-note pattern, and the left hand maintains the quarter-note bass line.