

Total performance time: approximately 110 minutes, including a 20-minute interval

Mahan Esfahani plays Bach

[Mahan Esfahani](#) harpsichord

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

From 'The Well-Tempered Clavier', Book II (by 1742): 35'

No.1 in C, BWV 870

No.2 in C minor, BWV 871

No.9 in E, BWV 878

No.10 in E minor, BWV 879

No.15 in G, BWV 884

No.16 in G minor, BWV 885

From 'The Art of Fugue', BWV 1080 (c.1742–9): 15'

Contrapunctus I

Contrapunctus II

Contrapunctus V

Contrapunctus VII

Contrapunctus IX

INTERVAL

From 'The Art of Fugue': 9'

Fuga a 3 Soggetti

'English' Suite No.3 in G minor, BWV 808 (1713–14) 18'

Prelude

Allemande

Courante

Sarabande

Gavotte I

Gavotte II

Gigue

'How strange, how new, how beautiful were his ideas in improvising. How perfectly he realized them! All his fingers were equally skilful; all were capable of the most perfect accuracy in performance.' As his obituary indicates, few if any could match J.S. Bach's facility for inventing musical ideas at the keyboard. He would have played on the full range of keyboard instruments then available, including the clavichord, with its gentle sonority of struck strings, and the harpsichord, its stronger sound made by plucked strings; at Cöthen Bach repaired all the court harpsichords.

As a teacher, Bach wrote compositions designed to enhance his students' technique. In 1790, Ernst Ludwig Gerber wrote an account of his father, Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, as a 22-year-old student of Bach: 'At the first lesson he set his *Inventions* before him. When he had studied these through to Bach's satisfaction, there followed a series of suites, then *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.'

The two volumes of **The Well-Tempered Clavier** comprise preludes and fugues in every available key, demonstrating 'well-tempered' tuning (not quite 'equal temperament', as is sometimes suggested) – in which relatively uniform tuning conveyed the system of major and minor keys more reliably than the earlier 'meantone temperament'. The title page of the fair copy of Book II reads: 'The Well-Tempered Clavier, Second Part, consisting of Preludes and Fugues in all the tones and semitones, written by Johann Sebastian Bach, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, Capellmeister and Directore Chori Musici in Leipzig'. It was composed between around 1738 or 1739 and 1742 – about 20 years after Book I. *The Art of Fugue* was also begun at around this time; the Book II pieces composed last were written on the same type of paper used for *The Art of Fugue*. It seems likely that most of the Book II pieces written in more mainstream keys – with fewer accidentals – were composed first.

The pairs of preludes and fugues are not necessarily related thematically; some were transposed from earlier works in different keys. One of the main developments in Book II is the two-part form – drawing on precedents from Scarlatti's sonatas – used in many of the preludes, which are more expansive than those of Book I. While many of the forms heard in Book I are carried over, they are fewer and further between: the Prelude of No.2 in C minor is a rare 'invention', for example. Even so, the 'stile antico' grandeur of the Fugue of No.9 in E shows that Bach had not lost touch with earlier precedents; it resembles a fugue – also in E major – by J.C.F. Fischer, from his *Ariadne Musica* (1702). The Prelude of No.16 in G minor is closer to home, recalling the opening of Bach's *St John Passion* (a work first performed on Good Friday). Book II of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is considered technically and aurally more challenging than Book I, prompting Busoni to argue that if Book I was for performers, Book II is for composers.

Bach's **The Art of Fugue**, which was incomplete at his death, survives as 14 fugues and four canons, all of which use in some way the same beguilingly simple idea. In 1751 – within a year of his father's death – C.P.E. Bach wrote of the work's impending publication: 'While the rules we were given were good and abundant, the needed examples were lacking. Yet one knows how fruitless instruction is without illustration, and experience shows what unequally greater advantage one draws from practical elaborations rather than from meagre theoretical direction.' He later added that this is 'the most perfect practical fugal work'.

In putting theory into practice so consummately, J.S. Bach was the first to systematically lay out the principles of fugue; there was no written equivalent until Marpurg's 1753 treatise – which was mostly based on Bach's music. Almost every fugue is referred to as a 'contrapunctus'. The solemnly beautiful Contrapunctus I is a four-voice fugue on the main musical idea (subject). Contrapunctus II is another four-voice fugue and is propelled along by French dotted rhythms. Both Contrapunctus V and VII use 'stretto' entries – when the imitation of the subject begins before the subject has been fully articulated. Contrapunctus VII is in four voices 'per Augment(ationem) et Diminut(ionem)'; the subject and its inversion are played with both augmented and diminished note lengths. Contrapunctus IX, 'alla Duodecima', features invertible counterpoint (contrapuntal lines swapping voices) at the interval of a 12th. The Fuga a 3 Soggetti ('Fugue in Three Subjects') is the 'Unfinished Fugue' and bears C.P.E. Bach's dramatic (probably exaggerated) inscription: 'At the point where the composer introduces the name BACH in the countersubject to this fugue, the composer died' – alluding to Bach's musical signature, B-flat–A–C–B-natural (H in German notation). This triple fugue may have become a quadruple fugue (with four subjects) had it been completed; scholars have since created their own versions of what might have happened next.

Apart from juvenilia, the **English Suites** may be Bach's earliest keyboard suites. The pieces show more French than English stylistic characteristics and may have been a tribute to Charles Dieupart, a French harpsichordist-composer celebrated in England. The opening Prelude of the Suite No.3 in G minor also shows the influence of the Italian style learned by Bach through the study of Vivaldi's 'ritornello' concertos, the keyboard emulating the alternation of orchestral and solo passages. The Allemande's theme appears first in the bass before being swapped between the hands; an intricate Courante follows, after which comes a sublime Sarabande. There is a pair of Gavottes, the second a 'musette', and the suite culminates in a Gigue – a three-part fugue.

Joanna Wyld © 2023



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**