

Twenty-four pieces of joy

Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier is a timeless masterpiece



By OpenAI
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When Bach composed his two volumes of preludes and fugues, he was already a mature man, widely celebrated as a virtuoso on the organ and harpsichord. He was surrounded by a circle of devoted students, some of whom had already attained a high degree of mastery in a form that was a demanding blend of improvisation and composition. The preludes and fugues were written, not to instruct beginners, but to display the full range of his own keyboard facility. The pieces are so well balanced that any one of them, however complex, can be performed with ease if the performer is familiar with the notes. Its ageless appeal is not based on virtuosity, but on the imaginative use of abstract forms, and on the realization of Bach's ideal of "well temperament," which allows for the production of an unending web of harmonic relationships. The music

itself remained virtually unknown for more than a century after Bach's death in 1750. The manuscript was discovered in 1829 by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn, who had the pages copied and published in 1833. Mendelssohn was only one of the pianists who rapidly brought the work to public attention. The first recording was made in 1901, but until recently, it was played on instruments much inferior to the instruments Bach knew. Now, for the first time, the music can be heard as Bach intended it to be heard.

To modern ears, accustomed to hearing the chromatic scale in every kind of music, the chromaticism of Bach's keyboard music can seem unremarkable. But Bach was the first to use minor sevenths, diminished fifths, and augmented fourths—the tension-producing intervals that are the cornerstone of the modern

Western musical scale. He was the first to use them consistently, and to create a structure that can accommodate them without breaking. If you have ever been disturbed by the clash of two notes that are a semitone apart—the so-called “wolf tones” that occur when a pipe organ is out of tune—you have a visceral sense of the problem that Bach helped to solve. Try to listen to the prelude in C Major, in the first book, without hearing the clash of the notes in the left hand, and you will begin to appreciate what a feat of ingenuity it is. Many experts consider it to be the greatest music ever written for the keyboard.

Bach certainly had an intuitive understanding of keyboard instruments. His first position as a musician was as a court organist. But he was also a very systematic and thorough craftsman, who spent years working out an elaborate system of canons, and who composed fugues that unfold over hundreds of measures. Some of the later preludes and fugues sound as if they were written in a trance. In many of them, the voices do not seem to be coming from a single source, but from a number of different parts of the keyboard. In this sense, they resemble modern minimal music, in which a single static melody is continually

repeated, with a subtle change of texture each time it is heard.

What I would like you to do is to listen to the prelude in E Minor, from the first book, which is my favorite among the preludes. Play it on a piano, if you can. You should realize that the piece is played entirely in the lower register of the keyboard. It begins with a succession of sixteenth notes, so fast that they blur into one another. Then the pace slows, and the melody is played by the left hand, while the right hand plays a counterpoint that is more melodic. This is a touch of genius, for two reasons. First, it gives the melody a different tone color. Second, it gives the listener a moment to catch his breath. Then the pattern is reversed, with the melody played by the right hand, while the left hand plays the counterpoint.

It is almost impossible to imagine how this must have sounded in Bach's day, when the notes were struck by wooden hammers, and the sound was much more percussive. Think of a sound that is already two-dimensional, and try to imagine a third dimension, which is time. Bach's music was a kind of time travel, going back to a time when music was a more mysterious art. It was a way of reaching into the past, and of drawing something out of it that was new. In

that sense, it is a perfect symbol for the modern world.

We still play Bach's music because it is an endless source of variety. Its endless possibilities depend on the interplay of two elements: the texture of the music, and the way the performer's emotional energy enters into it. The texture can be simple, or it can be very complex. It can be smooth and flowing, or it can be so dense that it seems to be made up of millions of tiny fragments. Bach was able to get the most out of the instrument by using the whole keyboard, so that the music often sounds like a conversation between two or more voices. The emotional energy comes from the performer, who must listen to the music closely to discover what it wants. It is not enough to use the score as a guide to the notes. You have to allow yourself to be carried along by the music, and to respond to it in a spontaneous way. The best performances are the ones that do not sound like performances at all. They sound like the creation of something new, which has never existed before.

I first heard the prelude you have been listening to performed by Glenn Gould. Gould's Bach recordings are still the ones to which every pianist compares his or her own playing. Gould had a way of intensifying a

performance to a feverish pitch, by taking it to the very edge of the notes. Nothing is left to chance, but everything is done at the last possible moment. The music is always about to fall apart, which is one of the reasons why it is so thrilling. The prelude is a kind of meditation. The left hand plays a repeated pattern, and the right hand plays a melody above it. Then the hands reverse roles, and the right hand plays the repetitive pattern, while the left hand plays the melody. This is a model of how to handle two elements in a composition. The first creates a kind of landscape, and the second enters into it. It is a matter of figuring out how far you can go, and then going a little farther. The music has a kind of logic to it, and it is the performer's job to make the logic clear to the listener.

It is important to realize that it is not necessary to play Bach's music with reverence. It is the work of a man who spent his whole life mastering his art, and it is meant to be played with passion. If you think about it, Bach's greatest achievement was not the music itself. It was the way he used the keyboard to create a sense of ideal order and harmony. This is a theme that runs through all of his music, and it is reflected in the first prelude and fugue, which seems like a model of how to create a perfect musical structure. It is as if Bach were

saying: Here is the way the universe is constructed—and here is the way it can be expressed in music. The universe is a place where everything has its place. It is a place where every action has its consequence, and where every consequence has its action. It is a place where something infinite and eternal is reflected in the subtle changes of a fugue.

When I look back at the long history of Western music, I realize that Bach's keyboard compositions had more influence on the course of music than any other work. They are the seed of the Romantic era, in which the composer strove to express his own individuality, and to give voice to the deepest emotions of the human heart. The Romantic era began with Beethoven, who was inspired by the idea of taking the keyboard to the very limits of its range. He gave the piano a sonority that was comparable to the sound of an orchestra, and he was the first to use the pedal with great subtlety. Bach's music was the source of Beethoven's deepest inspiration. It was the source of inspiration for Berlioz, and for every composer who came after him, including Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky. It is easy to forget that Bach's most important legacy is the structure of tonal harmony—the most important musical innovation since the era of the ancient Greeks.

Its ageless appeal is not based on virtuosity, but on the imaginative use of abstract forms, and on the realization of Bach's ideal of "well temperament," which allows for the production of an unending web of harmonic relationships. The music itself remained virtually unknown for more than a century after Bach's death in 1750. The manuscript was discovered in 1829 by the German composer Felix Mendelssohn, who had the pages copied and published in 1833. Mendelssohn was only one of the pianists who rapidly brought the work to public attention. The first recording was made in 1901, but until recently, it was played on instruments much inferior to the instruments Bach knew. Now, for the first time, the music can be heard as Bach intended it to be heard.

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I have been listening to Bach's Well Tempered Clavier for the last thirty years, and I have never grown tired of it. Maybe I never will. My hope is that it will become part of your life, too. It is always there, beneath the surface of