

A man with grey hair, wearing a white dress shirt, a dark tie, and a black vest, is seated at a harpsichord. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The harpsichord is ornate, with a dark wood case and a decorative panel on the front featuring floral and scrollwork patterns in gold, red, and black. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting with a window or doorway.

Acis

J. S. BACH

**The Well-Tempered  
Clavier Book I**

Matthew Dirst harpsichord

Das Wohl temperirte Clavier.<sup>1</sup>

Præludia, <sup>2</sup> und

Fugen über alle Töne mit Senitoria,  
Es soll tertiam majorem als Ueber Mi anhen,  
gint, als auf tertiam minorem ut de.

Mi Fa überstehet. Zum  
Nehmen im Gebrauch ist die Copie bey mir  
Musicalischen Schulen als auch in den  
Büchtern haben zusammen besondern

Zeitverstand angesetzt  
und verfertiget von

Johann Sebastian Bach.

1722

# J. S. BACH

## The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Matthew Dirst harpsichord

### DISC 1

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 1  | Prelude No. 1 in C Major, BWV 846       | 1:29 |
| 2  | Fugue No. 1 in C Major, BWV 846         | 1:57 |
| 3  | Prelude No. 2 in C Minor, BWV 847       | 1:43 |
| 4  | Fugue No. 2 in C Minor, BWV 847         | 1:43 |
| 5  | Prelude No. 3 in C-sharp Major, BWV 848 | 1:32 |
| 6  | Fugue No. 3 in C-sharp Major, BWV 848   | 2:51 |
| 7  | Prelude No. 4 in C-sharp Minor, BWV 849 | 2:56 |
| 8  | Fugue No. 4 in C-sharp Minor, BWV 849   | 3:37 |
| 9  | Prelude No. 5 in D Major, BWV 850       | 1:50 |
| 10 | Fugue No. 5 in D Major, BWV 850         | 2:26 |
| 11 | Prelude No. 6 in D Minor, BWV 851       | 1:57 |
| 12 | Fugue No. 6 in D Minor, BWV 851         | 1:47 |
| 13 | Prelude No. 7 in E-flat Major, BWV 852  | 3:46 |
| 14 | Fugue No. 7 in E-flat Major, BWV 852    | 2:01 |

15	Prelude No. 8 in E-flat Minor, BWV 853	3:07
16	Fugue No. 8 in D-sharp Minor, BWV 853	5:16
17	Prelude No. 9 in E Major, BWV 854	1:29
18	Fugue No. 9 in E Major, BWV 854	1:31
19	Prelude No. 10 in E Minor, BWV 855	2:24
20	Fugue No. 10 in E Minor, BWV 855	1:32
21	Prelude No. 11 in F Major, BWV 856	1:23
22	Fugue No. 11 in F Major, BWV 856	1:30
23	Prelude No. 12 in F Minor, BWV 857	1:55
24	Fugue No. 12 in F Minor, BWV 857	3:14
		55:01

## **DISC 2**

1	Prelude No. 13 in F-sharp Major, BWV 858	1:38
2	Fugue No. 13 in F-sharp Major, BWV 858	1:54
3	Prelude No. 14 in F-sharp Minor, BWV 859	1:29
4	Fugue No. 14 in F-sharp Minor, BWV 859	2:43
5	Prelude No. 15 in G Major, BWV 860	1:06
6	Fugue No. 15 in G Major, BWV 860	3:10
7	Prelude No. 16 in G Minor, BWV 861	1:34
8	Fugue No. 16 in G Minor, BWV 861	1:50

9	Prelude No. 17 in A-flat Major, BWV 862	1:28
10	Fugue No. 17 in A-flat Major, BWV 862	1:56
11	Prelude No. 18 in G-sharp Minor, BWV 863	1:51
12	Fugue No. 18 in G-sharp Minor, BWV 863	2:21
13	Prelude No. 19 in A Major, BWV 864	1:20
14	Fugue No. 19 in A Major, BWV 864	2:48
15	Prelude No. 20 in A Minor, BWV 865	1:28
16	Fugue No. 20 in A Minor, BWV 865	4:37
17	Prelude No. 21 in B-flat Major, BWV 866	1:30
18	Fugue No. 21 in B-flat Major, BWV 866	1:53
19	Prelude No. 22 in B-flat Minor, BWV 867	2:23
20	Fugue No. 22 in B-flat Minor, BWV 867	2:33
21	Prelude No. 23 in B Major, BWV 868	1:07
22	Fugue No. 23 in B Major, BWV 868	1:52
23	Prelude No. 24 in B Minor, BWV 869	4:40
24	Fugue No. 24 in B Minor, BWV 869	5:56
		55:11

Ryan Edwards and Shannon Smith, recording engineers  
Ryan Edwards, producer, editor and mastering engineer  
Recorded May 3 and October 18, 2021; June 6, 2022  
Rienzi—The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA

In 1722 Johann Sebastian Bach gathered twenty-four of his own preludes and fugues for keyboard—a pair in each of the major and minor keys—into a “fair copy” manuscript to be shared with pupils. Borrowing and expanding upon some earlier pieces while inventing others afresh, he titled this new collection *Das Wohltemperierte Clavier* (*The Well-Tempered Clavier*, or WTC). Twenty years later he revisited this format with a second group of twenty-four preludes and fugues, hence the familiar distinction between “Book 1” for the former and “Book 2” for the latter. This recording comprises all pieces in the 1722 source.

The concept of “well temperament,” as described in the 1680s by the German music theorist Andreas Werckmeister, means tuning the twelve chromatic pitches of the Western scale such that music-making in any key is at least theoretically possible. A remote key like C-sharp major thereby becomes feasible if not exactly beautiful; a C major triad in any well-tempered system sounds more restful, thanks to its more consonant thirds. Such “circulating temperaments,” as they’re sometimes called since they permit full traversal of the harmonic “circle of fifths,” served keyboard instruments of all kinds well into the nineteenth century.

In Bach’s day an expanded tonal universe had obvious appeal for the better players, who had long been expected to transpose in liturgical contexts. Collections of pieces in multiple modes or keys had been around for years as well: relevant examples extend from a 1584 corpus of dance music to J. C. F. Fischer’s *Ariadne musica* of 1702, from which Bach

borrowed a few thematic ideas for his own preludes and fugues. But in sheer scope and sophistication, no other collection comes close to the WTC. This masterpiece of the keyboard literature has, in turn, inspired subsequent composers to respond in kind: Frédéric Chopin’s *24 Preludes*, for example, or Dmitri Shostakovich’s *24 Preludes and Fugues*.

To address the other potentially confusing term in the work’s title: the German word “Clavier” (or “Klavier”) refers to a keyboard instrument, which for Bach meant principally the harpsichord or clavichord. Given his enthusiasm (from about 1740) for the newly invented fortepiano, we might include it as a historical possibility as well. But in the end, this sturdy music can be adapted to almost any instrument. The modern piano, as its champions attest, allows for a greater variety of tone color while enabling projection of this intimate music into large concert spaces; organ or chamber performance of many of the preludes and fugues is also quite feasible. More thoroughgoing transcriptions have long been popular, with some even sporting texts to be sung alongside the notes. (One wonders what Bach, an orthodox Lutheran, would have made of the first prelude from Book 1 in its familiar “Ave Maria” guise, which glosses a syrupy instrumental melody that Charles Gounod first superimposed over its repeating arpeggios.)

The title page of Book 1 further commends its contents “for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study.” With these

words Bach made clear his pedagogical aims for the WTC: to provide excellent examples of the strict and free styles for students of keyboard playing and composition. To that end, he offers in both books a comprehensive catalogue of imitative and non-imitative genres, textures, and techniques.

This explains why the WTC, almost alone among the works of J. S. Bach, continued to fascinate musicians well after his death in 1750. Over the next several decades, it nourished an ever-widening stream of reception, thanks to circles of keyboard-playing enthusiasts in central Europe and England. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart first encountered the WTC at the home of Viennese collector Gottfried van Swieten, who acquired a significant amount of Bach's music while in diplomatic service in Berlin. The Saxon composer Christian Gottlob Neefe had his precocious pupil Ludwig van Beethoven learn both books at the tender age of eleven. The work's entry into the public sphere happened around the turn of the century, with Samuel Wesley and others entertaining capacity crowds in London with WTC fugues on the organ.

Writers on music likewise embraced the cause, making repeated calls for the publication of both volumes. This finally came to pass in 1800-01 with the virtually simultaneous release of three editions from publishers in Bonn, Zurich, and Vienna. English reprints and eventually French and other editions followed, as public interest in Bach's music grew. Since then, this staple of the keyboard repertoire has never been out of print.

Unlike Bach's organ preludes and fugues, which tend toward the public and showy, the Book 1 preludes and fugues summon a variety of private moods, from the cheerful to the tragic. Compositionally they are equally varied, from straightforward preludes with consistent figuration to demanding fugues that explore every conceivable imitative possibility, some at considerable length. Most of the fugues in this volume have either three or four independent voices, which was the norm; exceptions include one fugue a 2 (E Minor) and two a 5 (C-sharp minor and B-flat Minor). Because no pair of preludes and fugues are alike, short descriptions of each follow, in the order that they appear in the volume and on this recording.

This recording features a harpsichord inspired by work of the Gräbner family from early eighteenth-century Dresden. Built in 2021 by John Phillips of Berkeley, California, it comprises three choirs of strings (2x8', 1x4') and a buff stop on a single manual. The decoration, inspired by marquetry of the same historical *milieu*, is by Janine Johnson.

### **DISC 1** [1][2] C Major—BWV 846

The **Prelude** recalls the way lutenists play their instruments, with abundant arpeggios (broken chords). Its extraordinary popularity may owe something to its mechanistic nature; Bach injected greater surface variety into other preludes premised on standard hand positions. With no melodic line, the unhurried sequence of harmonies sustains our interest instead. The **Fugue**, premised on a scalar motive followed by a quick rhythmic snap and a few skips, is a *tour-de-force* of imitative counterpoint, with multiple stretti (close entries of the subject) plus a grand concluding pedal point.

### [3][4] C Minor—BWV 847

With quick mirrored figuration in both hands, the **Prelude** anticipates nineteenth-century piano etudes for developing finger independence. Unlike those later pieces, however, this prelude's urgent harmonic trajectory culminates in a highly charged bit of keyboard recitative. From the outset of the nimble **Fugue**, its bouncy subject is paired with two contrapuntal partners or countersubjects. Once all possible combinations of these interlocking ideas have been heard, a final subject entry in the soprano voice provides closure.

### [5][6] C-sharp Major—BWV 848

Bach revised this **Prelude** multiple times, turning a modest two-part invention with easily invertible material into a brilliant if brief concert piece. The **Fugue**, premised on a sprightly melody with sequential skips of a sixth, explores this exotic tonality at some length, with modulatory episodes squarely in the driver's seat. Several thematic entries lack

clearly defined beginnings; others are turned into elaborate sequences.

### [7][8] C-sharp Minor—BWV 849

With a deliberate sense of pacing and highly expressive figuration, the **Prelude** exemplifies this composer's searching yet always goal-oriented harmonic language. The **Fugue**, unusually, features five independent voices and three successive melodic ideas. The first of these, a sober yet cramped subject in long notes, is eventually combined with two countersubjects, one smooth and flowing and the other identifiable by a knocking, repeated-note gesture.

### [9][10] D Major—BWV 850

Like several others in the volume, the **Prelude** is premised on a short motive that obliges the right hand to shift laterally throughout, with a ticking-clock-style accompaniment below. The very end injects a few measures of harmonic drama. The stylish **Fugue**, dominated by swooping upbeats and pervasive dotted figures, produces little counterpoint but plenty of sonorous music.

### [11][12] D Minor—BWV 851

The **Prelude** features an irregular succession of broken chords in the right hand against a more static left. Just before the end, the former morphs into a brief cadenza that brings on a powerful final cadence. The craggy **Fugue** subject borrows a quintessential late Baroque melodic shape: a minor triad plus its surrounding diminished seventh. Its two distinct ideas, presented sequentially at the outset, occasionally occur simultaneously (in two complementary voices) or in inversion.



### 13 14 E-flat Major—Bach 852

Notwithstanding its leisurely opening, the slyly sophisticated **Prelude** explores the combinatorial potential of two distinct motives, one flowing and scalar and the other proceeding deliberately from an initial upward leap. Each is explored singly before being developed together in some truly fetching counterpoint. The ebullient **Fugue** is likewise largely derived from two ideas: in this case, an open-ended subject head and a burbling arpeggiated tail.

### 15 16 E-flat/D-sharp Minor—Bach 853

Occasionally even Bach struggled with remote tonalities: he notated this **Prelude** with six flats and its companion **Fugue** with six sharps, presumably to avoid excess double-sharps or double-flats, respectively. The former features an embellished voice against a tolling accompaniment that has more than a few surprises. In the latter, an austere yet ingenious subject permits a wide range of learned devices, from multiple stretti in which all note values of the subject are doubled.

### 17 18 E Major—Bach 854

Litling arpeggios and a gentle compound meter in the **Prelude** channel the familiar pastoral mode while exemplifying the cantabile or “singing” style that Bach promoted as a goal for all keyboard players. The witty **Fugue** begins with what seems an impertinent question: two notes followed by a short rest. A flowing tail to this odd subject produces perpetual motion to the very end.

### 19 20 E Minor—Bach 855

The earliest version of this restless **Prelude** is essentially a finger exercise for the left hand, accompanied by simple chords in the right. While revising it Bach added an arabesque-style melody at the top of the texture plus a generous coda that doubles the speed of the underlying rhythm. With just two voices, the **Fugue** resembles a contrapuntal duet, but it’s really a blending of fugue and concerto, which produces a couple of striking unison passages.

### 21 22 F Major—Bach 856

Broken-chord patterns that migrate between the hands yield a mostly two-part texture in the **Prelude**. Its frequent trills sustain all long notes and add bustle to the arpeggios. The similarly buoyant **Fugue**, which channels the rhythmic style of the *passepied* (a popular French dance), wears its learning lightly; Bach shows here how even a lighthearted subject can accommodate an arcane device like *stretto*.

### 23 24 F Minor—Bach 857

The exquisitely calibrated **Prelude** reaches steadily upward through multiple levels of figuration, reaching its climax at the halfway point. An equally lovely *renouement* plays out over a long dominant pedal. The lengthy **Fugue** relies on a slow and snaking subject with abundant chromaticism. Quicker figuration in various countersubjects produces invertible counterpoint in multiple parts throughout, some of which barely fits under two hands.

## DISC 2 [1] [2] F-sharp Major—BWV 858

A simple two-part texture with abundant syncopations renders this **Prelude** well suited to the buff or lute stop of the harpsichord, which dampens the plucking action with a small piece of soft leather. The **Fugue**, premised on a winsome theme in two short segments, is propelled mostly by an accompanying idea that drives its episodes, some of which incorporate the subject head in elaborate sequences.

## [3] [4] F-sharp Minor—BWV 859

The classic motives of the limpid **Prelude** shuttle back and forth between the hands, occasionally with the support of a third stationary voice or accompanying chords. The slow-moving subject of the grave **Fugue** sounds almost unmettered; a more active countersubject produces streams of appoggiaturas (“sigh” figures) throughout, lending a deeply expressive character to the whole. A few inverted entries of the subject are artfully concealed, and the thick texture embraces some poignant harmonies, especially towards the end.

## [5] [6] G Major—BWV 860

The brilliant **Prelude** comprises cascades of arpeggios, which alternate between the hands before occupying both fully. The equally lively but more rigorously developed **Fugue** features a gigue-like theme that accommodates a wealth of artifice, including melodic inversion and stretto. Its lively forward drive mimics the concerted keyboard style of Bach’s day.

## [7] [8] G Minor—BWV 861

The layered texture of the **Prelude**, which begins with various motives oscillating against a tonic pedal, eventually allows for considerable tonal movement, as ideas and voice parts come and go freely. The more rigorous **Fugue** embraces a subject type whose basic contours signaled both pathos and learnedness for generations of composers. The most impressive device here is a summation stretto, which supplies a contrapuntal “crescendo” just before the end.

## [9] [10] A-flat Major—BWV 862

The **Prelude**, one of the most modern pieces in the collection, borrows its infectious rhythm from the *polonaise* (a Polish dance). Dominated by a pair of mutually invertible motives, it relies on a two-part texture as fleshed out occasionally with chords. For the **Fugue** Bach paired a brief triadic subject with flowing figuration, which remains constant to the end. Open-ended harmonically, the cunning theme reappears with some frequency; a final entry at the top of the texture allows it to resolve finally to the tonic.

## [11] [12] G-sharp Minor—BWV 863

An early admirer once observed about this wistful **Prelude** that it “makes melody out of the harmony, and harmony out of the melody.” Both elements are indeed intertwined in its leading idea, which is present in virtually every bar though subtly varied throughout. The **Fugue** embraces a more traditional aesthetic: that of the contrapuntal *verset*, which seems to have inspired the resolute subject and its diligent exploration.

### 13 14 A Major—BWV 864

A consistent harmonic rhythm and gliding passagework in the beguiling **Prelude** nearly mask its flawless counterpoint: three interlocking melodic ideas rotating freely through multiple invertible combinations. The gently teasing **Fugue** begins with a provocative gesture: a single note followed by rests, then a series of skips. More continuo pattern than melody, this initial idea finds a more fluid partner in a second subject that appears about one-third of the way through. The first theme eventually reappears on its own for a series of overlapped entries.

### 15 16 A Minor—BWV 865

The eloquent **Prelude** explores the combinatorial potential of three discrete gestures: undulating neighbor tones, a circular arpeggio figure, and scalar passagework. The imposing **Fugue**, premised on a concerto-like subject, is awash in subject entries, many in melodic inversion or stretto. Many have wondered whether this densely imitative movement served Bach as a virtuosic demonstration piece; it's certainly the most challenging movement in Book 1 to execute.

### 17 18 B-flat Major—BWV 866

A toccata in all but name, the **Prelude** begins with quick arpeggios and scales, to which majestic chords are subsequently added. The **Fugue** is a marvel of compositional engineering, with a jaunty subject paired consistently with two countersubjects. This produces multiple rotations of essentially the same material, as distributed differently among three active voices.

### 19 20 B-flat Minor—BWV 867

The gripping **Prelude**, with its throbbing bass and striving melody, recalls movements with similar heightened emotion in Bach's church music. The initial gesture of the **Fugue** subject, with its dramatic upward leap of a minor ninth, once represented for writers on music everything from wisdom to madness. Bach's grave theme also enables high-level counterpoint, from canonic strettos to simultaneous subject entries in multiple voices.

### 21 22 B Major—BWV 868

Set in a bright but seldom-encountered key, the genial **Prelude** explores the potential of a couple of scalar figures, one unidirectional in long notes and the other a turning figure in short notes. The cheerful **Fugue** begins with a subject that comprises two parts, the second of which answers the "question" posed by the first by resolving the phrase. Play and artifice mingle quite effectively here; subject entries include two that are casually inverted.

### 23 24 B Minor—BWV 869

For the **Prelude** Bach took his cue from the Italian trio sonata, many of which begin in a similar manner, with a binary movement featuring two closely entwined melodic lines above a "walking" bass. The melancholy and protracted **Fugue** is premised on a steadily grinding subject containing all twelve chromatic pitches, most of which are deployed consistently in weepy appoggiatura figures.

Widely admired for his stylish playing and conducting of Baroque music especially, Matthew Dirst is founder and artistic director of the period-instrument ensemble Ars Lyrica Houston. Previous solo recordings include his own reconstructions of organ concertos by J. S. Bach (Loft), about which *Fanfare* notes that “Dirst is a fluent and imaginative organist who dispatches his parts with panache.” *Early Music America* praised his recording of harpsichord music by François and Armand-Louis Couperin (Centaur) as a “stylish, tasteful, and technically commanding performance...expressive and brilliant playing.”

A GRAMMY®-nominee for Best Opera, Dirst led from the harpsichord a landmark 2011 recording of J. A. Hasse's *Marc'Antonio e Cleopatra* (Sono Luminus). With Ars Lyrica, he has been a strong advocate for lesser-known corners of the repertoire, in recordings of oratorios by Alessandro Scarlatti (Naxos, Sono Luminus, and Acis), a comic intermezzo by Domenico Scarlatti (Sono Luminus), and German sacred music of the 17th century (Centaur). His work on the podium has met with similar critical acclaim: the *San Francisco Classical Voice* admired his “deft sense of tempo and timing” in a “brilliant new revival of Leonardo Vinci's *Astianatte*” with Ars Minerva, while the *Washington Post* celebrated his “ear for detail and up-to-date ideas about performing Bach” in a *St John Passion* appearance with the Washington Bach Consort. He is especially fond of Handel operas and oratorios: the *Houston Press* celebrated his “sparkling direction” of *Agrippina* in a “peerless Ars Lyrica production.” Reviewing a performance of *Alexander's Feast*, *Dallas Morning News* enthused over “a performance as irresistibly lively as it was stylish.”

Equally active as a scholar, with a particular emphasis on the music of J. S. Bach and its historical reception, Dirst is Professor of Music at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston. His publications include *Engaging Bach: The Keyboard Legacy from Marpurg to Mendelssohn* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *Bach's Art of Fugue and Musical Offering* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

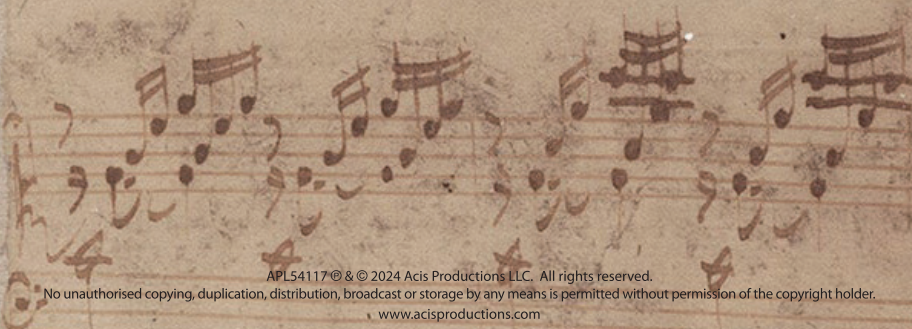
matthewdirst.com  
arslyricahouston.org

Sleeve images: The artist, instrument, marquetry details, and audience at  
Rienzi—The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas.

Thomaskirche and Thomasschule (left), Leipzig: engraving by C.C. Böhme after W. Radeagast, 1723.  
Collection of Bach Archive Leipzig

Booklet covers: Bach's 1722 autograph of the title page and BWV 846. Berlin State Library  
CD face: Relief of Johann Sebastian Bach for his 250th birthday in 1935. Artist: Friedrich Hörnlein (1873-1945).  
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# Præludium

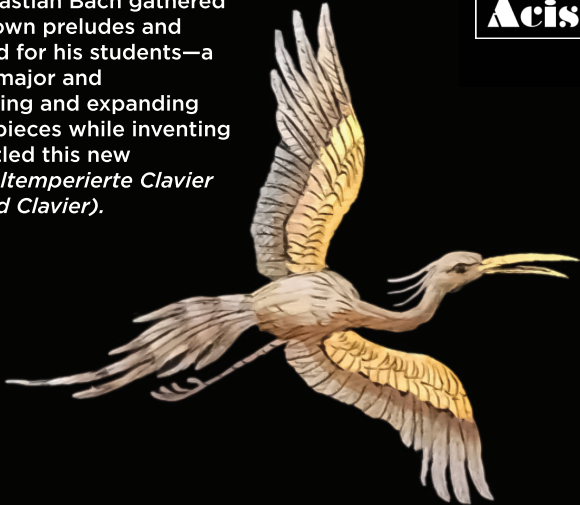


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Disc 1 55:01

Disc 2 55:11



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