Angela Hewitt
Sunday, March 30, 2008 • 4:00 pm
Newmark Theatre • Portland, Oregon

Program

J.S. Bach

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I
Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 2 in C minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 3 in C-sharp Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 4 in C-sharp minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 5 in D Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 6 in D minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 7 in E-flat Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 8 in E-flat minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 9 in E Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 10 in E minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 11 in F Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 12 in F minor

Intermission
(Approximately 30 minutes)

Prelude and Fugue No. 13 in F-sharp Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 14 in F-sharp minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 15 in G Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 16 in G minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 17 in A-flat Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 18 in G-sharp minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 19 in A Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 20 in A minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 21 in B-flat Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 22 in B-flat minor
Prelude and Fugue No. 23 in B Major
Prelude and Fugue No. 24 in B minor

Angela Hewitt appears by arrangement with Seldy Cramer Artists
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**PROGRAM**

**J.S. Bach**

**The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II**

- Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 2 in C minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 3 in C-sharp Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 4 in C-sharp minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 5 in D Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 6 in D minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 7 in E-flat Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 8 in D-sharp minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 9 in E Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 10 in E minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 11 in F Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 12 in F minor

**INTERMISSION**

(Approximately 30 minutes)

- Prelude and Fugue No. 13 in F-sharp Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 14 in F-sharp minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 15 in G Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 16 in G minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 17 in A-flat Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 18 in G-sharp minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 19 in A Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 20 in A minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 21 in B-flat Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 22 in B-flat minor
- Prelude and Fugue No. 23 in B Major
- Prelude and Fugue No. 24 in B minor

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Angela Hewitt

Born into a musical family (her father was the Cathedral organist in Ottawa, Canada), Angela Hewitt began her piano studies at the age of three, performed in public at four years of age, and a year later won her first scholarship. During her formative years, she studied violin, recorder, and classical ballet, in addition to piano. At the age of nine she gave her first recital at Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music, where she later studied. She then went on to study with French pianist Jean-Paul Sévilla at the University of Ottawa. She won First Prize in Italy’s Viotti Competition (1978) and was a top prizewinner in the International Bach competitions of Leipzig and Washington, D.C., as well as the Schumann Competition in Zwickau, the Casadesus Competition in Cleveland, and the Dino Ciani Competition at La Scala, Milan. In 1985 she won the Toronto International Bach Piano Competition.

Angela Hewitt has performed throughout North America and Europe as well as in Japan, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand, Israel, China, Mexico, Turkey, and the former Soviet Union. Highlights of recent seasons include her debuts in Carnegie Hall, the Concertgebouw, and with the Cleveland Orchestra, as well as a North American tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. Her recitals have taken her to the festivals of Edinburgh, Osaka, Prague, Hong Kong, Schleswig-Holstein, Brescia/Bergamo, and Oslo to name but a few. Her frequent Wigmore Hall and Royal Festival Hall recitals in London sell out months in advance. As a chamber musician she has joined international artists at Lincoln Center in New York and in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London. Her recording of the Bach Gamba Sonatas with German cellist, Daniel Mueller-Schott, was released in June 2007.

Angela Hewitt is a phenomenal artist who has established herself at the highest level over the last few years, not least through her superb, award-winning recordings for Hyperion. Completed in 2005, her eleven-year project to record all the major keyboard works of Bach has been described as “one of the record glories of our age” (The Sunday Times) and has won her a huge following. She has been hailed as “the pre-eminent Bach pianist of our time” (The Guardian) and “nothing less than the pianist who will define Bach performance on the piano for years to come” (Stereophile). She has a vast repertoire ranging from Couperin to the contemporary. Her discography also includes CDs of Granados, Beethoven, Rameau, Chabrier, Olivier Messiaen, the complete solo works of Ravel, the complete Chopin Nocturnes and Impromptus, and three discs devoted to the music of Couperin. Her recordings of the complete solo keyboard concertos of J.S. Bach with the Australian Chamber Orchestra entered the billboard charts in the United States only weeks after their release, and were named Record of the Month in Gramophone magazine. The first of a series of CDs featuring the music of Schumann was released in November 2007.

Angela Hewitt’s entire 2007–08 season will be devoted to performances of the complete Bach Well-Tempered Clavier in major cities all over the world, including London (Royal Festival Hall), New York (Carnegie Hall), Los Angeles, Berkeley, Vancouver, Denver, Ottawa, Toronto, Mexico City, Bogotá, Singapore, Tokyo, Seoul, Macao, Sydney, Melbourne, Warsaw, Milan, Lisbon, Venice, Bilbao, Zurich, Stuttgart, Glasgow, Pretoria, and Cape Town. A special DVD lecture-recital on her interpretation of the music of J.S. Bach was released by Hyperion in February 2008.

In July 2005, Angela Hewitt launched her own Trasimeno Music Festival in the heart of Umbria near Perugia. Now an annual event, it draws an international audience to the Castle of the Knights of Malta in Magione, on the shores of Lake Trasimeno. Seven concerts in seven days feature Hewitt as a recitalist, chamber musician, song accompanist, and conductor, working with both established and young artists.

What draws the listener to Angela Hewitt…has to do with contact. Most piano performances arrive in translation: the inner musician making a decision, then issuing a command that makes its way through the body onto

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the keyboard and into the ear. The process alters the results. Ms. Hewitt is one of those rare musicians who seems to get something into their heads and hearts and find it at their fingertips instantaneously. To fuel this leap must require a fund of psychic energy beyond the average capacity. Good musicians are good athletes, not in the muscular sense but in the staying power of their imaginations. This pianist’s resolve to imbue every musical moment with an unrelenting sense of theater would exhaust most of us in 10 minutes.


Angela Hewitt was named Gramophone Artist of the Year in 2006. She was awarded the first-ever BBC Radio 3 Listener’s Award (Royal Philharmonic Society Awards) in 2003. She was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2000, and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire in the Queen’s Birthday Honours in 2006. She has lived in London since 1985, but also has homes in Ottawa, Canada, and Umbria, Italy.

Program Notes for Sunday, March 30

**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
(Born March 21, 1685, in Eisenach; died July 28, 1750 in Leipzig)  
The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I

The six years that Johann Sebastian Bach spent as Capellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen (1717–23) were some of the happiest of his life. The young prince (only twenty-three years old in 1717) was a viola da gamba player of great skill and had an eighteen-piece orchestra of excellent caliber. Bach was delighted to work for someone who both “loved and understood music.” On taking up his new duties, Bach relinquished the composition of organ and choral music that had occupied him previously in Weimar. Only a few cantatas were composed to celebrate royal birthdays and special occasions. Cöthen was in Saxony where Calvinism predominated at the time, and there was little music in the local churches (with the exception of the Lutheran Agnus kirche where Bach worshipped and went to practice the organ). He was now expected to produce secular instrumental music, and he did so, as was his custom, with great energy and all his heart and soul. From the Cöthen period date the Brandenburg Concertos, the four orchestral Suites, the Partitas, Suites, and...
Sonatas for solo and accompanied violin and cello, and the French Suites for keyboard. Bach and the prince became close friends, and he often accompanied the prince on his journeys. Upon returning from a trip to Karlsbad in 1720, Bach was confounded by the news that his wife, Maria Barbara, had died and was already buried. With four children ranging from the age of five to twelve to bring up, he could not remain a widower for long, and within a year had married Anna Magdalena Wilcke (other spellings of her name being Wilcken, Wölkchen, Wülcke, or Wülcken), sixteen years his junior and a fine soprano. Their marriage was celebrated on December 3, 1721, with four barrels and thirty-two carafes of wine — almost a hundred liters!

As his duties at court were not totally time-consuming, Bach was able to devote himself to the musical education of his family. In 1720, when his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann was nine years old, he presented him with a notebook in which they began to compile pieces that contain, among other things, first drafts of what we know today as the Little Preludes, the Two- and Three-Part Inventions, and eleven of the first twelve Preludes from The Well-Tempered Clavier. It was always Bach’s aim to develop musical intelligence from the very beginning, along with technique — something which is often overlooked today. Many of the pieces in the Clavierbüchlein are in Wilhelm Friedemann’s own hand, as he was undoubtedly learning how to compose.

It is impossible to give exact dates of composition of many of Bach’s works, as they were often compiled from already-existing material. In the case of The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, Bach wrote the date 1722 on the title page of the fair copy:

The Well-Tempered Clavier or Preludes and Fugues through all the tones and semitones including those with a major third or Ut Re Mi as well as those with a minor third or Re Mi Fa.

For the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study composed and prepared by Johann Sebastian Bach at present Capellmeister to His Serene Highness the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen, and director of His Chamber Music. Anno 1722

To satisfactorily explain the adjective well-tempered is to tread on dangerous ground. Treatises have been written on the subject, and even today the debate continues. Tuning a keyboard instrument always has to be a compromise, because the intervals of a perfect fifth and a perfect third are incompatible with each other and with a pure octave. In Bach’s day, the common practice was to use the mean tone system, which retained the purity and sweetness of the major third. This meant, however, that it was impossible to play in all twenty-four keys because of “errors” that would occur in the more remote ones. As musicians became more and more dissatisfied with these restrictions, they turned to equal temperament which favors the interval of a perfect fifth, and which makes each key tolerable (although inevitably one can argue that much is lost by making everything uniform, especially as regards the character of each key).

In between these two systems there can be many modifications, and it is thought that Bach must have used his own method of tuning. The only, rather vague, testimony we have on the subject comes from his obituary, written by his son C.P.E. Bach and his pupil J.F. Agricola, where it states that: “In the tuning of harpsichords he achieved so correct and pure a temperament that all the keys sounded pure and agreeable. He knew no keys which, because of impure intonation, one must avoid.”

In 1715 Johann Caspar Fischer had composed a set of preludes and fugues in twenty different keys called Ariadne Musica. Four years later, Johann Mattheson wrote a user’s manual in figured-bass playing that gave two examples in each of the twenty-four keys. It was left to Bach, however, to give us the first real music in keys like C-sharp Major and E-flat minor. Twenty-two years later, in 1744, he compiled another twenty-four preludes and fugues to complete what is now known as the “48.” It is an inexhaustible treasure trove of the greatest possible music, combining contrapuntal wizardry with his immense gift for expressing human emotion in all its forms. Bach amazes us by absolutely never running out of steam. In The Well-Tempered Clavier, we find a piece to suit every mood and every occasion.

In Bach’s time the word clavier did not denote any keyboard instrument in particular, but meant harpsichord, clavichord, spinet, virginal, or even the organ. An inventory taken at the time of his death lists many different instruments, but gives no details beyond their size and value. Bach reportedly preferred the clavichord.
for its ability to produce shadings and even vibrato, although surely its extreme delicacy must have made anything but the quietest pieces rather frustrating. Perhaps for this reason, Bach’s friend, the great organ and harpsichord builder Gottfried Silbermann, set about working on a fortepiano (following the first attempt at one by Cristofori), which Bach tried before his death. It is said that he found it interesting, but weak in the high register and too hard to play (complaints often voiced by pianists today about some modern grands!). His music requires great sprightliness, clarity, rapidity, warmth, strength, and subtle shadings that have to be matched by both instrument and player. If Bach’s music sounds “wrong” on the piano, then surely most of the blame must lie with the pianist. The instrument itself is, I find, ideal, as it can be made to sing and dance as Bach demands. The difficulty is in making it sound easy.

The Prelude No. 1 in C Major of Book I has become one of the most famous pieces of music ever written. Perhaps because of its utter simplicity, people feel they have to do something with it — to interpret it. The biggest culprit was Gounod who wrote his Ave Maria by adding a sugary tune above the broken arpeggios — something that has fatally distorted our perception of this simple study in line. What seems easy on paper, though, is extremely difficult to play (as anyone who has attempted this piece knows). An even tone, a perfect legato without the use of pedal, a steady pulse, an awareness of harmony and how, for instance, a diminished-seventh chord can add intensity — all of these things can be learned here. To that is added Bach’s sense of inner peace for which we also must strive. The four-voice Fugue in C Major is very affirmative, using the device of stretto (introducing the subject in another voice before the last entrance is finished) to cumulative effect. The technical difficulties of playing this Fugue are so much more advanced than those of the Prelude that many a student will give up in despair!

Prelude No. 2 in C minor can easily sound harsh and ugly. Although it is certainly a busy piece, the touch must remain buoyant, and the harmonic outline interesting. The cadenza at the end should sound improvised without losing its way. The decisiveness of the ending in the major mode is carried over into the three-voice Fugue. Articulation is important here: to distinguish the subject from the two countersubjects, you often have to play both legato and detached with the same hand simultaneously. This is one of the hardest things for a student to do, but absolutely necessary in Bach if the different voices are to be distinguishable.

With the arrival of the Prelude and Fugue No. 3 in C-sharp Major we have a marvelous change in color. We also have the first of the Preludes that is really dance-like. Lightening the quaver at the end of the bar will give it that extra swing. Then Bach ties that third beat over the bar which, for contrast, gives it an accent. Halfway through the Prelude, he changes from double counterpoint to broken arpeggios, which build up to the brilliant ending. The Fugue continues in the same joyful mood with a subject that skips about in sixths. For a very large hand this can be a clumsy piece, as the proliferation of sharps means you are mostly playing between the black and white keys (even clumsier on the harpsichord where the keys are narrower). Yet, it needs to sound as though you’re having fun. Bach certainly enjoyed writing something challenging in this new key!
I like to think of the Preludes and Fugues falling into groups of four, and prefer to present them that way in concert (unless I am doing a complete cycle). Considered in this way, each first Prelude seems to have an arresting beginning, and each last Fugue is of considerable dimension and emotional power (the possible exception being the G minor Fugue, but even here a definite conclusion is reached). The last Prelude and Fugue of the first group, No. 4 in C-sharp minor, is undoubtedly one of the greatest of the “48.” The Prelude is in fact a loure — a French theatrical dance related to the French gigue but much more languid. The other fine example in Bach’s keyboard music is in the fifth French Suite: it is expressive but not sentimental. In the original version of the Clavierbüchlein, no ornaments were added, but in later revisions many appeared. The interpreter should feel free to decorate along the same lines. The beginning of the Fugue immediately announces something special. The subject contains just four notes that, when placed together on the staff, form the outline of a cross lying on its side. Such a subject, in Bach’s hands, will inevitably produce an emotionally powerful work. This is the first of two five-voice fugues in Book I, and the first is written in stile antico (the Baroque adaptation of Renaissance polyphony in four or more parts). The first ten entries of the subject are not accompanied by any definable countersubject — solely a descending figure in crotchets that is also inverted. The mood is one of solemn introspection. After a cadence in the relative major (E), Bach introduces the first of two countersubjects — this one in quavers, which begins to awaken us from our meditation. It drifts in, appearing first in the upper voice. Fourteen bars later the second countersubject announces itself, characterized by a supplanting repetition of the second note. From then on the whole Fugue is built around these three subjects, culminating in an intense dissonance over a pedal point, four bars from the end. Then the tension rapidly dissolves and Bach ends with a cadence in the major key (called tierce de Picardie) — with the pedal point still resonating. These final bars are not always played softly, but Czerny tells us that Beethoven (who played most of the “48” by the time he was eleven years old) interpreted it this way. Surely the emotion expressed here is forgiveness and does not need to be forced.

We return to lightheartedness with Prelude and Fugue No. 5 in D Major. The touch must be light, otherwise your right arm will seize up before the end of the Prelude! The left hand can make it dance. Bach ends with a flourish and two dramatic rests requiring an appropriate gesture. The Fugue is in French Overture style, necessitating some double-dotting (holding notes for longer than their notated value). Halfway through, Bach begins to use only the opening, swirling part of the subject, tossing it around from voice to voice. The joyful, ceremonial chords at the end are more effective if an extra octave is added to the bass line.

The whole character of Prelude No. 6 in D minor depends on how you play the first two repeated Ds in the left hand. They give the pulse and set things going, ready for the right hand to enter with its broken chords. In these, it is necessary to find the notes that move (rather than the ones that remain stable) and bring out their line. The left hand becomes increasingly melodic, the right hand breaks loose in a series of descending diminished-seventh chords, and the Prelude ends defiantly. After this, the Fugue can seem a little sober, but its singing style gives us some tender moments. The subject, which has a rhetorical pause, the phrasing of which is originally by Bach, is the first one in the “48” to be inverted (turned upside down).

The most substantial Prelude in Book I is No. 7 in E-flat Major — the only one of the first twelve not to have been included in Wilhelm Friedemann’s notebook. It is in three parts: a preamble which improvises around a pattern of semiquavers, a chorale-like fugato introducing a subject that rises in fourths, and a double fugue combining these two musical ideas. I think it is important to find a common pulse for these three sections so that Bach’s counterpoint can flower naturally. This is one of the most difficult Preludes for fingering and clarity of texture. The whole thing must build up to the wonderful pedal point at the end (this Prelude reminds me of the “St. Anne” Prelude and Fugue for organ, BWV 552 — also in E-flat Major). After such a serious-minded Prelude, Bach surprises us with a wonderfully witty three-voice Fugue. The chromaticisms we find in the descent into C minor (bars 15–17), are echoed, teasingly, in the last bar.

Then, without warning, we are immediately in another world, and in the key of E-flat minor. A feeling of solitude permeates Prelude No. 8, which is one of the most moving moments in the “48.” The tempo is that of a slow
Sarabande — dignified and noble. It is an impassioned aria of great eloquence. The deceptive cadence in bar 29 is especially poignant (and for a fleeting moment may make us think of the same progression in Chopin’s “Raindrop” Prelude). The simple beauty of the Fugue subject comes to us from far away, without breaking the mood set by the Prelude. One by one the three voices enter, without giving us any definite countersubject. In fact, Bach becomes rather obsessed with the subject, giving it several different treatments. In bar 19 we have the first stretto — a very close overlap between the middle and treble voices, only two beats apart. In bar 24 we have another, but with the middle voice in a slightly augmented form using a dotted rhythm. Six bars later, after yet another stretto, we hear the subject turned upside down for the first time. This passage culminates in the strong bass entry in bar 44. The overlapping continues unabated, and brings us to a half-close in bar 61. Then we have the first fully augmented entry of the subject, given to the bass. Before it is finished, we will hear the original form in the middle voice, and the inverted one in the treble. The augmented version is then sung by each voice in turn, finishing with the treble (bar 77). This is a wonderful moment where, for me, time seems suspended. We think Bach is going to finish with a descent to the final chord, but instead he surprises us and rises to the major key. I feel it is his way of expressing hope in the Eternal, rather than despair. This Fugue is noted in D-sharp minor (the enharmonic key of E-flat minor), probably because it was originally written in D minor before its inclusion in The Well-Tempered Clavier. Some editions print it, however, in E-flat minor. Neither key is easy to read (six sharps or flats), and in this instance I don’t feel that it matters which key you learn it in (personally, I go for E-flat minor). With the case of its counterpart in Book II, I do feel that it should be “felt” in D-sharp minor, although if I had to explain why, I’m not sure that I could! The important thing is to make this piece expressive, and not have it sound like a study in fugal construction.

The Well-Tempered Clavier was never intended to be performed as a cycle of pieces in the manner of, for example, the “Goldberg” Variations. The one piece of evidence we have that it was performed at all in Bach’s day comes from the son of one of his students, Gerber, who wrote: 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. This latter work Bach played altogether three times through for him with his unmatchable art, and my father counted these among his happiest hours, when Bach, under the pretext of not feeling in the mood to teach, sat himself at one of his fine instruments and thus turned these hours into minutes.

There is no real reason why we cannot mix them up and play them out of order (as long as we do not do what Busoni did, and exchange some Fugues for others when he felt they were ill matched!). I am always amazed, nevertheless, at how Bach has the knack of

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changing mood so rapidly, yet so effectively. This is the case with Prelude and Fugue No. 9 in E Major. The grace, charm, and good nature of the Prelude completely dispel the melancholy of the previous work. It is a *pastorale*, and was once attached to the sixth French Suite in E Major (it is found in a copy of the Suite made by the above-mentioned Gerber). The Fugue makes me think of three village gossips chattering away at once. Right up to the end they are each trying to get a word in (with Bach using just the opening two notes of the subject by that point!).

The key of E minor brings us some arresting music. Prelude No. 10, in the original version in the *Clavierbüchlein*, was made up of chords only — solid in the right hand, broken in the left. There was no haunting melody. That was added later — as was the *Presto* that forms the second part. By adding these things, Bach turns it into an orchestral piece — one can imagine an oboe solo, accompanied by strings and continuo. For a pianist, the challenge is to make it sound Baroque, and not like Chopin. The *Presto* (a rare tempo marking in Bach’s own hand) is built, like the opening, on a descending bass line, and leads us brilliantly into the only two-voice Fugue in the “48.” It is amazing how much energy is to be found in so thin a texture! Bach has fun with a *hemiola* (switching from three to two accents in a bar), and flagrantly breaks the rules by writing, for two brief moments, in consecutive octaves. There is much humor in his brilliance.

Prelude and Fugue No. 11 in F Major should not be approached before the student has mastered the Two-Part Invention in A Major. It is so similar to the Prelude and has the same difficulty made slightly easier: playing long trills evenly in one hand while the other is simultaneously dealing with a lot of semiquavers. Both share the same dance-like time signature of 12/8. The Fugue is a *passepied* (we find another example of this dance in the fifth Partita). It is probably the easiest of the Fugues in Book I — though none is easy.

No. 12 in F minor makes an appropriate end to the first half. Here the Prelude is an *allemande* (without the characteristic upbeat) in which the note values are precisely indicated to obtain a perfect legato and a rich contrapuntal texture. It is expressive but flowing, and has the processional character of that dance. The Fugue subject has strength, dignity, and solemnity. Its combination of chromaticisms and expressive intervals give it great intensity. It is written in quadruple counterpoint (subject with three countersubjects), and at times is very difficult for the player to untangle. The episodes (which give relief from subject entries, and instead have free counterpoint using a motive or two from material already presented) add a feeling of tenderness. The highlight of the Fugue, for me, is when the alto enters with the subject in the relative major key (A-flat) in bar 34. It is like a voice from afar. Bach nevertheless ends this Fugue firmly on the ground, with the last entry of the subject ringing out in the bass.

The second half of Book I opens with a perfectly matched Prelude and Fugue in the bright key of F-sharp Major. Prelude No. 13 is a two-part invention where syncopations produce continuous suspensions. Some modulations into minor keys bring a few dark tones to what is otherwise a fresh and airy piece. The Fugue continues in the same mood. In the first episode (bar 7), Bach introduces a new motive, which later develops into a second countersubject. This theme gives the Fugue a touch of gentleness, and Bach decides to end the piece by having it appear in each of the three voices, in turn.

Prelude No. 14 in F-sharp minor is springy and energetic, with much imitation going on between the voices. The seemingly ordinary tenor part in the first bar (quavers, punctuated by rests) takes on a far greater role halfway through — when Bach turns it into chords. The lyrical four-part Fugue is of an unusual beauty. Its subject creeps
from F-sharp up to C-sharp using a deviant, chromatic route, before descending back to the tonic. The countersubject is based on a sighing, two-note figure that gives the piece its sorrowful character. The subject appears twice, inverted: in the alto in bar 20, and in the bass in bar 32. The climax is reached with the bass entry in bar 29, after which it calms down to the final reiteration that ends the piece — this time in the major key.

The Prelude and Fugue No. 15 in G Major, which shares the same joyful spirit as the two Brandenburg Concertos in that key, gives the player an opportunity to show off. The Prelude has two time signatures: 24/16 for the right hand, and 4/4 for the left hand. Is that simply to indicate that all semiquavers are triplets, or to warn us against going too fast? It certainly has to have bounce. Bach has several tricks up his sleeve for this virtuoso Fugue. The subject, which centers on a written-out invention using the opening melodic fragment in every voice and in almost every bar — sometimes shortened, and often inverted. It is especially expressive when it reaches the high A in bar 18. The Fugue subject is angular and stubborn, with its repeated notes at the end, but they, along with the punctuated quavers (later chords) of the countersubject give it direction and bite. The texture lightens up a bit before coming to a passage very difficult to play clearly (bars 32–33). The piece ends with the same four notes in the same position as the A-flat Major Fugue, but in a totally different mood.

Prelude and Fugue No. 19 in A Major is a special case. The Prelude is innocent enough, although the three voices are really engaged in a strict mini-fugue (fughetta). With the Fugue, however, we have one of the most extraordinarily quirky pieces by Bach that is also fiendishly difficult to play. The subject begins with an exclamation (perhaps “Hey!” or “Ouch!”), then proceeds to jump upwards in fourths. Once the three voices get going, we have numerous cross-rhythms and suspensions that have to be brought out independently, no matter how awkward it is to do so with only two hands. It would be much easier to have this Fugue played by a string trio! Then, to further challenge the player and add to the excitement, Bach introduces runs in semiquavers to accompany the zigzagging subject. It is important to retain the mood of playfulness and stay calm! Tovey suggests picking a tempo which is “not unplayable or unenjoyable after reasonable practice.” Hubert Parry, in his biography of Bach (published in 1909), described this Fugue as “capricious and willful, but not attractive” and deemed it a “comparative failure.” If Beethoven did indeed play most of the “48,”
I can see him delighting especially in this wonderfully crazy piece.

Prelude No. 20 in A minor is in 9/8, just like the previous Fugue, yet should sound totally contrasting. The harmonies do not move a lot within each bar (many bars stay on the same chord), so a lively tempo seems appropriate, and it begins rather nervously with those written-out trills in the left hand. The Prelude is short, which is a good thing, because the Fugue is very long. Many people criticize the latter for this reason, saying that it is too academic and tedious. I never tire of its marvelous subject and the multiple stretti (also using the inversion) which take us on a journey through many keys. It is a showpiece, not for the performer's virtuosity, but for Bach's. The tempo is linked to its character, which refuses to be hurried (and to the need for clarity in the part-playing). There is a curiosity at the end: Bach writes a pedal point, to be held underneath the four voices, that is unplayable with only two hands. Did he write this Fugue for a harpsichord with pedals, or for organ, or did he simply think that a third hand could be standing by at the ready? Without the low note, the ending certainly sounds weak, considering the immense buildup to that point. On the modern piano we are lucky to have the sostenuto pedal (or middle pedal) that will hold this note for us, if we can catch it at a time when we are playing nothing else. It takes some doing, but solves the problem very nicely!

The last group of four in Book I begins with the refreshing Prelude and Fugue No. 21 in B-flat Major. The toccata-like Prelude is very popular with piano students, who do not always find it easy to play the broken chords evenly (think of a violin here). The runs must also be without bumps when one hand takes over from the other. More problems arise on the second page where it suddenly becomes like an improvisation (the markings Adagio and Presto in some editions never appeared in Bach's hand). The chords must certainly be in French overture style (full sounding and double-dotted), and the tempo relaxed, but the dazzling scales should retain a sense of pulse. The timing here is very hard to teach and must be felt. The last bar is made most effective by disappearing into thin air. The jaunty Fugue is written in three-part counterpoint, which is tricky to distinguish when playing. The main problem is to separate the bell-like notes of the first countersubject from the semiquavers—both, of course, often played by the same hand (the latter usually end up in jerky groups of two). It is easy to forget that once you have chosen an articulation for a subject or countersubject, it should be adhered to as often as possible.

Another sublime moment arrives with Prelude and Fugue No. 22 in B-flat minor. The Prelude is funeral music, and fills us with grief and sorrow. There is tenderness, though, and a quiet sense of reaching out. Even in this chordal texture it is important to clarify the part-playing, and not blur it with pedal. Any repeated quavers should be made completely legato by not lifting the key all the way between repetitions. The stillness achieved here is held over into the beginning of the five-voice Fugue — another one written in stile antico. The subject is drastically simple: a fall of a fourth is answered by four descending crotchets. It is, however, the leap of a minor ninth after the rest that pierces the heart. There is no countersubject, but rather numerous stretti, culminating in a five-part one in bars 67–71. It has one other unusual feature — parallel entries of the subject in bar 55.

The key of B Major would have been a new and difficult key in Bach's day. The clarity and light of Prelude and Fugue No. 23 come as balm after the intensity of the previous piece. The Prelude, based on turns, is a three-part invention that adds a fourth part in the last line. The first four notes of the Fugue are identical to those of the Prelude, but whether this is intentional or not must remain conjecture. I love its gentle transparency, which for some reason reminds me of Christmas. Bach inverts the subject twice (bars 18 and 20), making it sound more quizzical. A lot of Baroque fingerings (avoiding the passage of the thumb) are required to play the runs while holding other notes (i.e. 3-4-5-3-4-5). The ending, with the soprano and tenor in parallel motion, makes us smile.

Bach does not choose to end Book I brilliantly. He goes the opposite way and writes music that would not be out of place in the B minor Mass. The Prelude and Fugue No. 24 in that same key is one of the hardest to bring off in performance unless it is played at the end of a cycle. It is as though it needs the preceding twenty-three to make its full impact. The tempo markings are Bach's own: Andante is an indication not to take the Prelude too slowly, and Largo befits the gravity of the Fugue. The Prelude seems like a transcription of a duet for two woodwind instruments, with the steady walking bass of the continuo underneath. It is the only Prelude in Book I to be written in
binary form with repeats (we shall have this often in Book II). The chromaticisms towards the end hint at what is to come in the Fugue — otherwise it is beautifully serene. The Fugue is one of those which we can tell from the outset will not be easy to deal with. Its desolate, sighing subject (the two-note slurs are original Bach) fittingly covers all twelve notes of the scale and modulates to the dominant. In the course of this very long Fugue, Bach sometimes uses only half the subject, or even just the first three notes (bars 19 and 28). From the very beginning the player must have a feeling for the structure of the whole piece and a map in mind of where it is going. The severity of the expositions (blocks of subject entries) is offset by the beautiful tenderness of three of the episodes — those in bars 17–20, 26–29, and especially that in bars 65–68, which is like a silent prayer. They are completely (and unusually) made up of new material that has nothing to do with subject or countersubject. After this, it builds up rapidly: half of the subject is sung by the tenor; the whole arrives powerfully in the bass; separated chords (a sure sign in Bach of the end approaching) lead us to the final entry in the alto over a pedal point, with the soprano taking over in the last few notes. The end is reached with finality and acceptance.

Program Notes
for Tuesday, April 1

Johann Sebastian Bach
The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II

The year after Johann Sebastian Bach wrote the date 1722 on the title page of his first set of twenty-four preludes and fugues, The Well-Tempered Clavier, he left the court of Anhalt-Cöthen to take up his duties as Kantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. During the next twenty-seven years, until his death in 1750, he wrote a breathtaking amount of music — mostly sacred and secular cantatas, motets, Masses, Passions, and oratorios. Also from this time date the six keyboard Partitas, the completion of the French Suites, the Clavierübung II and III, the “Goldberg” Variations, another set of twenty-four preludes and fugues and, in the last few years, the Musical Offering and the Art of Fugue. It is therefore not surprising that he left us with no fair copy of what is now known as Book II of the “48.” Time must have been scarce! He also had to direct the Collegium Musicum, train and discipline unruly choirboys, play at weddings and funerals, and deal with the town authorities, who were a constant source of annoyance. On top of all that, he and his wife Anna Magdalena added thirteen more children to their family — only six of whom survived infancy.

Bach did, however, leave us a composite manuscript, probably built up between 1739 and 1742. Each prelude and fugue is written out separately on a folded sheet of paper (prelude on one side, fugue on the other, to avoid page turns), and several are copied out in Anna Magdalena’s hand. There is no title page, and three of them have been lost. Many corrections and revisions are visible, done at different times. After Bach’s death, this autograph probably went into the hands of his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, and we know that Muzio Clementi owned
it in the nineteenth century. In 1896 it was acquired by the British Museum, where it remains today.

It would be easy if the story ended there. It does not. Bach continued to make revisions in copies belonging to his pupils right up until 1748 — perhaps never giving us his final thoughts on the subject. The most important of these sources is the complete manuscript in the hand of Johann Christoph Altnickol (1719–59) who became Bach’s son-in-law in 1749. It is dated 1744 and bears the title page:

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Second Part, consisting of Preludes and Fugues through all the Tones and Semitones, written by Johann Sebastian Bach, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, Capellmeister and Directore Chori Musici in Leipzig.

After Bach’s death, individual preludes and fugues were published in various theoretical treatises, but it wasn’t until 1801–02 that three complete editions of the “48” appeared. In the case of Book II, however, none was based on the British Library autograph, which was then unknown. We have had to wait until the 1990s for editions to appear that take into account all of the available sources (the new Associated Board edited by Richard Jones, and the Neue Bach-Ausgabe edited by Alfréd Dürr). The first English edition (a copy of which was passed down to me through my father’s family) was done by Samuel Wesley and C. F. Horn, and published in installments between 1810 and 1813 (with a different price for subscribers and nonsubscribers). In their introduction, Wesley and Horn make the following claim:

The 48 Preludes and Fugues, the first 12 of which are here presented to the Musical World (in a more correct manner than they have ever yet appeared, even in the Country where they were constructed) have always been regarded by the most scientific among scientific Musicians, (the Germans) as matchless Productions.

They give detailed recommendations on how to study them (slow practice, beginning with the less complicated ones), even advising the avoidance at first of those in C-sharp Major, E-flat minor, and F minor “because they are set in Keys less in Use in England than upon the Continent, and therefore are at first puzzling.” Myriad signs are used in the text to mark each entry of the subject, its inversions, augmentations, and diminutions.

This complex history of Book II is the reason why so many variants appear in the editions we now have. In the end, of course, that is not the most important thing (bringing Bach’s music alive should be uppermost in the mind of the interpreter), but it is fascinating to see how his musical imagination was constantly seeking to embellish and improve. Indeed, several of the pieces survive in early versions probably dating from the 1720s and 1730s. For their inclusion in The Well-Tempered Clavier II, they underwent extensive revisions, enlargements, and often transpositions.

Whereas the famous C Major Prelude of Book I unfolds with the greatest calm and simplicity, its counterpart in Book II begins on a grand scale, with an octave pedal point in the bass. This is an earlier work (BWV 870, probably dating...
from the 1720s) that Bach doubled in length and greatly embellished to suit his purpose. The beauty of its rich four-part texture is best brought out by carefully distinguishing the different voices, giving special attention to the ties and suspensions. The flow is unhurried, the phrases long. In bar 20 we have an extensive recapitulation beginning in the subdominant key (F Major). A short coda is built over a return to the initial pedal point. The three-part Fugue is simple but playful, with its insistence on a mordent — it appears in three different guises in the subject alone: as the opening three notes; decorating the crotchet after the leap (which should be added wherever possible); and finally giving shape to the running semiquavers. The latter can easily sound like a finger exercise by Hanon if one is not careful. Had Bach left this piece as he originally conceived it, the end would have come in bar 68, depriving us of the wonderful coda with the left-hand leaps. Thank goodness he had second thoughts!

The Prelude and Fugue No. 2 in C minor begins with a two-part invention similar to those of Book I, but in binary form. The dialogue constantly shifts between the parts — the most expressive measures having a chromatic line. It is a fairly innocent partner to the more serious Fugue. The latter's quiet, solemn subject holds back for the first half of the piece, before closing in the dominant in bar 14 (note the entrance in the lower voice in bar 13, which is a partial inversion). Then it is presented in augmentation against both original and inverted subjects. A very tight series of strettos follow, with five entrances in only three bars. Up until now this has been a three-voice fugue, but ten bars before the end Bach introduces a fourth, bass voice singing the augmented subject with great drama and intensity. Another close stretto passage leads, with a cadenza-like flourish, to the final cadence. Some editions show a major-chord ending (called tierce de Picardie), but I find that inappropriate to its unrepentant mood.

The Prelude No. 3 in C-sharp Major is the only one in Book II to use a persistent, broken-chord pattern so common in the earlier set. Originally it was composed in C Major (as was the Fugue), and written out as a progression of five-part chords whose figuration was left up to the performer. For placement in the Well-Tempered Clavier II, Bach transposed it up a semitone to fill the C-sharp Major slot, and wrote out his preferred treatment of the chords. There exist two different versions of the tenor voice: one in the London autograph, and one in the Altnickol copy — the latter being more melodic and expressive. Bach surprises us by tacking on a three-part fughetta marked Allegro, thus breaking the feeling of serenity. It's a good move, however, and prepares us in spirit for the Fugue proper. This is a rather cocky piece in its refusal to follow the rules. The second voice enters before the first has even finished the statement of the subject, and the third comes in already inverted. Indeed, a lot of the time Bach uses only the first four notes, also in diminution beginning in bar 5. The two appearances of the subject in augmentation in bars 25 to 27 should really stand out. The running figure introduced in bar 8 gradually becomes more and more important, finally taking over in the great flourishes before the coda.

We are in ceremonial, festive mood for the Prelude and Fugue No. 5 in D Major. The Prelude is definitely a trumpets-and-drums piece, full of joy and brilliance (reminding us of the Overture of the Partita No. 4, also in D Major). The first problem to consider is the one posed by the double time signature. Does Bach intend the quavers in the second bar to remain in triple-time, as some interpreters play them, or does he mean strictly what he writes? I opt for the clarity and contrast of the latter. Then, there is the question of the length of the dot beginning in bar 5. This
can also be done in a number of different ways, and who is to know what Bach really intended? I hear this figure as drumbeats, and bring it out as such, making it as short and sharp as possible. When, beginning in bar 12, it is merely a part of the melodic line, the rhythm should definitely be assimilated as part of a triplet. The recapitulation is triumphantly heralded by a descending scale in bar 40. The texture of the four-part Fugue is extremely dense, with the constant appearance of the last four notes of the subject (Tovey has counted between eighty and ninety times, besides the twenty-three full subject appearances, in its short duration). The opening four notes also appear by themselves intermittently. I like to think of the sound of brass instruments in this Fugue, hanging over from the Prelude. There are some closely knit stretti which are hard, but not impossible, to distinguish on the piano. It is important to take note of the alla breve time signature, denoting a quicker flow and fewer strong beats, than if it were written in 4/4.

The Prelude and Fugue No. 6 in D minor is a popular one, no doubt due to its showoff Prelude. As in the finale of his keyboard concerto in the same key, Bach begins the Prelude with a descending scale — soon taken up by both hands. Much of the figuration reminds us of Vivaldi, especially the attractive passage that returns in the final bars, where the two hands play on top of each other (much easier, of course, on a two-manual harpsichord). Bach heavily revised this Prelude — one of the earliest compositions of the Well-Tempered Clavier II — extending it from 43 to 61 bars. The Fugue subject winds its way upwards in triplets, then descends in an expressive, chromatic scale. There is some beautiful dialogue between the three voices, notably in the first episode, which uses material from the countersubject, and the third, which playfully repeats the opening of the inverted subject. The end is calm.

The delicacy of the Prelude No. 7 in E-flat Major reminds us of a lute piece. Its pastoral character includes some wide but elegant leaps in the left hand, giving it a dancelike flavor. The opening interval of the Fugue subject — a rising fifth — was, according to Wilfrid Mellers, “traditionally a synonym for God, since [it has] the most absolute consonance after the octave, which is hardly an interval at all.” The key of E-flat Major, with its three flats, was used by Bach “to symbolize the peace of mind that flows from the Trinity.” This four-part alla breve Fugue is certainly affirmative, especially when we get to the final cadence. There is no countersubject, but rather two stretto passages, the first involving tenor and bass, the second soprano and alto. A change of color in bar 53 brings out the lovely tenor entrance of the subject in the subdominant key.

The difficult key signature of No. 8 in D-sharp minor will deter many people from learning this Prelude and Fugue — a shame, as it is very much worth the extra trouble. The Prelude is a two-part invention in binary form, using an ascending motive in broken thirds followed by a descending scale. The addition of demisemiquavers in the second half makes it quite a bit busier, but should not cause it to hurry or become heavy. The Fugue is the most deeply expressive of Book II, and is described by Tovey as an Aeschylean chorus (Aeschylus was a Greek tragic poet whose references to music were almost always of a mournful, sorrowful character). The countersubject plays an important role, as does the easily overlooked motive of bars 5 to 6 in the right hand, which is the basis of several episodes. There is a gradual buildup in intensity with successive entries of the subject, brought to a close in F-sharp Major. The next entrance — in B Major in the alto voice — is very luminous and leads to another cadence in the dominant key of A-sharp minor. The upper three voices then drift up and down in an episode leading to the strong bass entrance in bar 40. Now we expect the final cadence, but instead Bach miraculously adds a coda in which the soprano and tenor both state the subject in mirror image. The Fugue is resolved in the major key, releasing the tension in a most beautiful way.

The Well-Tempered Clavier is certainly not a work meant for sheer display, and there are times when that seems the farthest thing from Bach’s mind. The Prelude No. 9 in E Major could not be more gentle and unassuming, with its rocking octaves in the left hand. Clear part-playing is essential throughout. Modeled on the E Major Fugue of Fischer’s Ariadne Musica, Bach brings us his own wonderful example of the stile antico (the Baroque adaptation of Renaissance polyphony in four or more parts). The time signature of 4/2 is typical of this, as is the purely vocal style. Hubert Parry called it “one of the most perfectly beautiful and the most perfect as a work of art, whether judged from the point of view of texture, closeness and coherence of treatment of the subjects, or of form.” There is no room for a
detailed analysis here — a very worthwhile exercise that can be found outlined elsewhere. The beautiful, soaring entrance of the soprano at the end of bar 37, where the descending notes of the subject continue to fall (then repeated by the bass), is wondrous. To play the final two bars in the spirit of “Rule, Britannia,” which they definitely echo, would be, in my opinion, a terrible mistake! (The latter was written in 1740 — at the time when Bach was compiling the Well-Tempered Clavier II.)

The Prelude No. 10 in E minor immediately reminds us of the opening of the Partita No. 3 in A minor, sharing the same time signature and characteristics. As in the Two-part Invention in D minor, it requires a steady stream of semiquavers to be played under or above a very long trill. A good sense of direction is needed to prevent monotony. If the Prelude lacks some excitement, the same cannot be said about the terrific Fugue with which it is paired.

Beginning with the upbeat to the first bar, its subject has tremendous energy and drive, combining triplets, crotchets, semiquavers, and dotted notes. Wanda Landowska justly described it as “combative, vehement.” The tied notes in the tenor in bars 56 to 58 add some lightheartedness. In the London autograph, the end came at bar 70 (the first pause), but once again Bach changed his mind, and continued the Fugue with the powerful bass entrance in bar 71. A cadenza-like passage comes to a halt, which is marked Adagio in some copies (although not in Bach’s hand). Should the final three bars return to the original tempo? I think they should come close, and not let the momentum flag.

Simply looking at the layout of the Prelude No. 11 in F Major, we get a feeling of great space. Its long, sustained notes, which build up the five-part texture, make us think more of the organ than the harpsichord. The opening turn motive and the descending groups of four notes and their inversions form the entire prelude. Clarity in the voice-leading will, as always, help the listener and provide interest. Before the recapitulation in bar 57, a cadence in A minor (with a sharpened third) leads us back to the tonic with only three quavers in the left hand. They must be sensitively handled to make sense of the rapid modulation.

After such a spacious Prelude, Bach gives us a very lively gigue in 6/16. Without the score in front of us, we probably wouldn’t realize that the subject of the Fugue begins in the middle of the bar — at least not until we reach the high F in bar 4. An unusually long episode of twenty-four bars occupies the middle of the piece. The soprano entrance in bar 85 surprises us by being in the minor mode — switching to major halfway through. More humor is apparent in the way the last bass entrance in bar 89 is extended by additional repetitions of the opening motive. The demisemiquavers above it should be as brilliant as possible.

Bach places one of his most attractive pairs at the end of the first half of Book II. The Prelude No. 12 in F minor is written in the empfindsamer Stil (sensitive...
“singing” style) that was made popular by Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel. Parallel thirds and sixths and especially the sigh motive (two slurred notes) are the most telling characteristics of what was also called the galant. This Prelude looks easy on paper, but is very hard to bring off well. The most common error is to play the opening four bars very slowly, then speed up for the next four where not much is happening. A moderate tempo must be found that suits the simple tenderness of the whole piece, but keeps a steady flow. Evenness of tone can be worked on here, as well as part-playing (especially in the left hand in bars 21 to 28 and similar passages). The Fugue opens with another sigh beginning on the upbeat, but it's an energetic one. We can almost hear the footwork in this bourrée, which shares the same spirit as the Capriccio of the Partita No. 2 in C minor. The rising sixth motive in the episodes, derived from the subject, adds charm. There are no complicated fugal devices here, just pure pleasure in the subject itself, with special insistence on its repeated notes.

The last twelve Preludes and Fugues contain some of the most challenging music of the “48” to interpret. C.P.E. Bach wrote: "Interpretation is nothing else but the capacity to make musical thoughts clear — according to their true content and affection — whether one sings or plays." Such a task is made even harder by the fact that this is the longest segment and requires a great deal of imagination to sustain the interest. A lively treatment of dotted notes enlivens the Prelude No. 13 in F-sharp Major, otherwise it will die on the spot. Where there is a steady stream of demisemiquavers, the dotted note will have to fall with the last of these as written, but elsewhere it can be shortened in the French manner to add sprightliness.

Once again we have a partial recapitulation at bar 57. The whole thing needs a sense of freedom within bounds, culminating in the last three bars. It is unusual for a Fugue to begin with a trill on the leading note, but this one does. It is a gavotte in the galant style, with the sighs appearing first in the countersubject, and later featured in two episodes. On closer examination, we realize that they derive from the tail end of the subject. Some triple counterpoint in bars 12 to 20 and 44 to 52 is worth bringing out. This innocent-sounding Fugue is not as easy as it might seem, and benefits from a clear articulation.

A feeling of sad tenderness pervades the beautiful Prelude No. 14 in F-sharp minor, beginning with the opening two notes of the melody. Bach makes that falling fourth the most expressive feature of the piece, especially noticeable in bar 34 where the Neapolitan sixth (the first inversion of the major triad built on the flattened second degree of the scale — in this case G Major) is used to magical effect. The long, singing phrases are similar to those in Variation 13 of the "Goldberg," and should be free within a steady pulse. The Fugue is the only real triple fugue (one with three subjects) in the whole Well-Tempered Clavier. Perhaps for this reason it is often compared to the monumental C-sharp minor Fugue of Book I (some analysts also consider it a triple fugue — others a fugue with two very important countersubjects). In my opinion the similarities end there. True, the third subject here is similar to the first countersubject of the C-sharp minor, but the mood is completely different. The fugue subject itself is well-suited to a lively articulation, as is the second subject introduced in bar 20 (although the whole piece is often played with no articulation whatsoever). The big danger is to speed up when the third subject slithers in at bar 36. It adds momentum and propels us to the final unison F-sharp, but should not hurry. Beginning in bar 55, Bach combines the three subjects in three different permutations.

The Prelude and Fugue No. 15 in G Major is easier to sightread than most, and has lots of gaiety and charm. Be careful not to reduce the Prelude to a finger exercise — it is worth more than that! Think of it being played by stringed instruments, which it does indeed characterize. The mordents in the left hand in bars 15 to 16 and 47 to 48 do not have time to speak in too fast a tempo. There is an interesting variant in bar 7: most editions stick with the C-natural of the autograph, I prefer the C-sharp that is found in some subsequent copies. For sheer brilliance, go rather for the Fugue (or fughetta, as it is so brief), and give your technique a chance to show off! This piece exists in a much earlier, simplified version, without the wave of demisemiquavers that precede the final entrance of the subject. Not for the first time, Bach has a twinkle in his eye at the close.

We return to solemnity with the Prelude and Fugue No. 16 in G minor. The Prelude is an obvious case for double-dotting and for adding ornaments in places similar to those where Bach has already done so himself. It begins and ends with a pedal point, forming one long arc — the last two bars of which are especially beautiful.
The great strength of the Fugue is built upon the rhythm of the subject, punctuated by rests, and its insisted, repeated notes. Make sure we know already in bar 2 where the first beat lies. The countersubject, which adds even more emphasis, is constantly present, and breaks forth in full glory at bar 59, where we have two sets of paired entries (one of the subject, one of the countersubject), both in thirds. The last, most powerful entrance of the subject in the bass in bar 79 goes as far as adopting its first three semiquavers to add excitement. The abrupt ending is surely intentional, and would be spoiled by any big ritardando. This is definitely one of Bach's best!

The Prelude and Fugue No. 17 in A-flat Major is a large-scale work in which the two pieces are perfectly matched. It is therefore surprising to learn that although the Prelude was composed expressly for the Well-Tempered Clavier II in 1741, the Fugue dates from a much earlier time (probably the 1720s). The gently flowing Prelude with its swinging bass motive is like a concerto movement, despite the fact that so much of it is only in two voices. It can easily begin to wander if the harmonic outline isn't followed. Bach always has a plan: in this case, building up to the dominant key in bar 17, calming down to the relative minor in bar 34, triumphant in D-flat Major in bar 50, and beginning his approach to the end in bar 64. Just before he reaches his final destination, he darkens the harmony with the Neapolitan sixth in bar 74 — then a final sigh, and we finish on a very elegant cadence. In its earlier version (BWV 901), the four-part Fugue was in F Major, and ended in bar 24. It grows from the first, gentle entrance of the subject, to the strong and expansive coda. The chromatic descent of the first countersubject adds extra beauty, and the semiquavers of the second countersubject keep things moving. Bar 32 sees a somber entrance in E-flat minor, after which light reappears, especially in bar 41. An imitation of an improvised pedal solo in bars 45 to 46 ends with a pause. The last utterance of the subject is accompanied by a fifth voice, making things a little crowded. A broadening of the tempo, however, is certainly permissible.

The Prelude No. 18 in G-sharp minor is yet another in the galant style with sighing thirds and sixths. The tempo is a lively one, though it must remain delicate, graceful, and not heavy. G-sharp minor is a difficult key to play in, with its numerous sharps and double-sharps. Tovey wisely advises the player “not to risk a toboggan run with his tempo!” The forte and piano markings are Bach's own. The E-natural I play in the bass of bar 6 is one example of an accidental found in the British Library autograph that didn't make its way into the first editions (in the parallel passage in bar 22, it did). The Fugue is extremely difficult. Often it is played very slowly and solemnly, soon becoming very tedious. The subject of this three-part double fugue is smooth, but there are lots of opportunities elsewhere for a lively articulation. The second, very chromatic subject is introduced in bar 61, and by bar 97 Bach is combining the two. Don’t miss how he uses the second half of the subject motive for the buildup in bars 128 to 131. The bass gets especially enthusiastic towards the end.

My choice of tempi in the “48” is often influenced by what immediately precedes or follows — something which is very important when performing or recording the complete cycle. If the G-sharp minor Fugue were taken too slowly, it would then too closely resemble the pacing of the Prelude No. 19 in A Major. You could say, of course, that the tranquility of this Prelude is enough of a contrast from the turbulence of the preceding fugue, but it doesn’t hurt to emphasize this. I also don’t believe that Bach's placement was random. As in Book I, the Preludes and Fugues seem to naturally fall into groups of four, with a conclusive end to each, and varied moods and styles in between. This is a pastorale, reminiscent of the one in his Christmas Oratorio. The recapitulation in bar 22 (now in D Major), with the upper parts reversed, is most beautiful. The Fugue is light and lively, not quite as chatty as the E Major in Book I, but similarly playful. The springy, dotted rhythms are played as written, but need to be clearly articulated.

The next Prelude, No. 20 in A minor, is a strict two-part invention written in invertible counterpoint (constant swapping of the themes between the two voices) and mirror inversion. In it, chromaticism (which for Bach signified grief or sorrow) is taken to the extreme, pushing the limits of tonality. Although it is intense, it retains an abstract quality, best expressed in a flowing tempo. If too slow, the listener's interest is lost in no time. In a way it speaks for itself, but benefits from good phrasing and an overall sense of direction. Another example of this kind of writing can be found in the first of the Vier Duette, BWV 802. To accompany
it, Bach places his wildest and most brilliant Fugue of the “48.” The opening four notes of the subject, plunging to a diminished seventh, are used in many other works, among them Handel’s Messiah (“And with his stripes”) and Mozart’s Requiem (Kyrie). The rest of the subject is simply these notes twice as fast, landing us back on the tonic. An advanced technique is needed to bring off the swirling countersubject and trills with bravura. The rests in bar 5 and elsewhere can be lengthened. A real storm brings on the savage, furious ending. Some editions end this piece on a major chord, but again I see no relief here to justify that. As Mellers says: “If there’s a victory, it has not been easy...[but rather] a matter of touch and go.”

There is nothing at all to ruffle us in the Prelude and Fugue No. 21 in B-flat Major. The Prelude rolls gently along, engaging in some attractive hand-crossing and imitative dialogue between the parts. With both repeats it is also very long, but do we always need to be in a hurry? The Fugue is a minuet, and has the courtesy and elegance of that dance. The slurs in bars 3 to 4 should be added throughout. There are different versions of the upper voices of the last six bars. Bach seems to have changed his mind about the voice-leading several times. The one I opt for is supposedly his last revision.

No 22 in B-flat minor is a jewel of a prelude. The thematic material is rich, but tightly compressed into the first seven bars. Wanda Landowska points out the resemblance of the alto voice in bars 3 to 4 to the theme of the Prelude in the same key of Book I. Is it a coincidence? I like to think not. The time signature is alla breve, which should keep us from dragging. The ascent of the upper voices over a dominant pedal beginning in bar 74 reaches its high point in the major key to which Bach returns for the final chord. After the expressive restraint of the Prelude, Bach gives us one of his most severe, self-denying fugues. The articulation of the subject varies between editions: some have nothing written at all, others have dashes over the first three notes, one has dots. What is clear is that the first two notes should at least be separated and well marked, and the rests should be as expressive as the notes themselves. The same is true of the soprano in bar 13. The time signature of this five-page fugue is 3/2, and its relentless forward motion is important to the overall structure. There are brief moments of softening expression (bars 33 to 41, bar 54), but otherwise there is little room for anything but the strictest discipline. The stretti are masterful, using both the inverted subject alone, and combined in contrary motion with the original. The last of these uses paired entries moving away from each other to build to the very end.

The change of key to B Major comes as a welcome balm after such trials. The Prelude No. 23 is in concerto style, with some passages obviously imitating the soloist. The ascending scales that Bach divides between the hands should be seamless. Another abrupt ending may surprise us, but that is what he wanted. The noble subject of the Fugue crawls upwards in minims before its quick descent. The countersubject has this same geometric design, but with quicker note values, and starts its ascent a bar behind. This is a good example of a fugue particularly suited to performance on the piano. The four voices creating its dense, tangled texture can be more easily distinguished by using different colors for each — not, however, without a great deal of work! A second subject of sinuous quavers appears in bar 28. Bach gets carried away in bar 68, adding some semiquavers to the bass. It’s a good place to start when considering the overall tempo.

I find it very fitting that Bach ends the “48” with a dance. It is too often forgotten that his music is inspired by its rhythms and delights. The Prelude No. 24 in B minor could not begin more simply. Two voices of equal importance are all that Bach needs to create his musical thoughts. The Prelude exists in two different time signatures: an early version in common time with quicker note values, and a later one in alla breve and marked Allegro by Bach. The latter looks better on the page, is easier to read, and should sound more buoyant. The Fugue is a passepied (compare it with the one in the Fifth Partita and the F Major Fugue from Book I). Although we are in a minor key, the octave leaps and brilliant trills make us partakers in Bach’s joy. The end of the cycle comes not with a feeling of finality, but rather leaves us astonished by his genius and fulfilled by his generous spirit and warmth of heart.

It is futile to even attempt to say which book of the “48” is the better. Both contain jewels of many colors. There are certainly differences, especially in the preludes which, in the second set, are on a much bigger scale (accounting for the extra half-hour playing time). Whereas in Book I only one prelude is in binary form (two sections both repeated), there are ten examples
of this in Book II. The beginning of what was later called sonata form is apparent in many of the preludes, with substantial amounts of thematic material being partially recapitulated — usually with a different distribution of parts and often in a key other than the tonic. There are no two- or five-part fugues in The Well-Tempered Clavier II, but some of the three-part ones are among his most ambitious. Certainly there are more pieces in Book I that are immediately familiar to us, making them more approachable to the listener and student, but undoubtedly Bach’s maturity and mastery of the genre is nowhere more brilliantly displayed than in this final set.

What does playing a prelude and fugue mean to a pianist these days? For most piano students it is a necessary part of an exam or an international piano competition — to be got through as best one can and, hopefully, without going wrong! Often they are approached too soon — long before a good grounding is established in the easier pieces of Bach. It is impossible to play a four- or five-voice fugue if you cannot already play cleanly in two or three voices. For many teachers it is perplexing, as Bach never wrote any tempo or expression marks in the score, and edited versions give conflicting opinions. For professional performers it is a great test of their abilities (and nerves!). Many prefer to play Bach transcriptions (by Liszt or Busoni, for instance) where it is easier to hide behind more notes and add the sustaining pedal. Artur Schnabel, one of the great pianists of the twentieth century, preferred not to perform The Well-Tempered Clavier in concert halls because he considered it too intimate. To become familiar with the complete “48” is to discover the endless variety within them where no two preludes are alike, and every fugue is constructed in a different fashion.

The Well-Tempered Clavier has never ceased to be a source of inspiration, fascination, and wonderment to professional musicians and music lovers. We have been told many times that, after his death, Bach’s music fell out of favor and that it was only “revived” by Mendelssohn. That is partly true, of course, but Mendelssohn was introduced to it by his teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter, who himself had been a pupil of Johann Kirnberger, who in turn was a pupil of Bach. Zelter, the director of the Berlin Singakademie, counted among his friends the poet Goethe, who often heard the young Mendelssohn performing Bach’s Fugues. Late in his life, Goethe made the following remark:

It was when my mind was in a state of perfect composure and free from external distractions, that I obtained the true impress of your grand master. I said to myself: it was as if the eternal harmony was conversing within itself, as it may have done in the bosom of God, just before the creation of the world.

—Program notes by Angela Hewitt © 2007, from liner notes for the CD, Bach: The Well-Tempered Clavier (Das Wohltemperirte Clavier), Hyperion Records