

Fugue No. 1

C Major

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 1, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

The C Major prelude that precedes this fugue is pure Bach: chaste in its form and profoundly expressive. The work appeared first in Wilhelm Friedemann's *Clavier-Büchlein*. In that "Little Clavier Book" Bach had instructed his young son in the art of ornamentation and methods for realizing chord progressions. In keeping with his didactic purpose, Bach arpeggiated the first five measures then wrote the remainder in block chords, expecting his son to apply the same figuration. Notwithstanding its origin, the prelude's high voice mi-fa-mi-la-re-sol foretells the essential contour of the fugue's subject.

If you think of the subject as a dancer, then the fugal process is one of finding a suitable partner. But what if the dancer has the ability to be its own partner? Well *that* is stretto. And stretto is what the C Major fugue is all about.

The timeline represents the subject and its answers in gold. After the exposition you will notice but one instance (m. 9) where this melody dances by itself. In every other case the melody is in stretto *with* itself.

Now stretto is not unusual in a fugue; it is rather like metaphor to the poet. In the *Well-Tempered Clavier* fugues with stretto slightly outnumber those without. But to find a fugue with this much stretto is quite special. Just listen to the spectacular stretto in mm. 16-18 where the subject sounds simultaneously in all four voices!

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If you really want to know this fugue you should study each of its strettis. Click on the timeline and note the variation of time and pitch intervals, and directions, separating its stratified subjects.

Anybody can write a melody that can be harmonized by a second voice. But it requires more craft to invent a melody that can accompany itself. This skill of melodic invention was prized by composers of the 18th century, and it achieves its highest expression in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The potential of this fugue's subject to accompany itself is hinted at by its first four notes. Let us call this the subject's "head motive." Observe that it is the bottom half of a major scale. Now you will notice that the first four notes of the answer comprise the top half. So between head motives Bach has outlined a complete scale.

Now you may ask, "What is so special about that?" It is elegantly simple that's all. As with most great ideas, what lies behind them is elegant simplicity.

The head motive is so simple in fact that it confounds easy classification. You see it is normally expected that we should classify the fugue's answer as either *tonal* or *real*. But this answer resists being put into either box because it wants to belong to both.

Without getting mired in the technical definitions of tonal and real, you will have noticed that the interval content of the subject and its answer are the same. This suggests that the answer is a transposition of the subject to a new key. That meets the test of a *real* relationship.

On the other hand, most people would hear the answer as continuing in C. That meets the test of a *tonal* answer. Although it is likely that you would hear the answer in C, this is not the only way to hear it. If you prefer you can hear the answer as having modulated to G. If this is your "answer" then the fugue's answer is a transposition of the subject up a fifth.

So the exposition can be heard in either way: tonal or real. You can decide how you want to hear it depending upon how you feel at the moment.

Another odd characteristic of this the first fugue of "the 48" is that it has an unconventional exposition. Normally the exposition's even-numbered entries are subjects and the odd ones answer them. This is like the rhyme scheme *abab*. But here Bach has used an *abba* exposition. This pleasing deviation could be likened to the difference between a Spenserian and a Shakespearian sonnet.

Can you hear the *abba* rhyme? Bach has paired the 1st entry (m. 1) with the 4th (m. 5). These are subjects; they begin with the bottom half of the major scale (remember that head motive?). By contrast the 2nd entry (m. 2) has been paired with the 3rd (m. 4). These are answers; their head motive is the top half of the major scale.

Of course if Bach made the rules then he could break them. But it does seem extraordinary for the first fugue of this cycle to have departed from the norm. It strikes me that the composer was trying to tell us something. But what?

I think that Bach was trying to tell us two things. First he wanted us to know right from the beginning that each fugue will be unique. Each one will push the envelope in some way. Each one will ask, then "answer," a different contrapuntal question.

So don't come to the *Well-Tempered Clavier* expecting that every fugue will have been shaped by the same cookie-cutter as the one before it. If that is your expectation then you will be disappointed. Each fugue is handcrafted, one-of-a-kind.

The uniqueness of each fugue is what I'm after and I'll bet that you are too. It would have been dull for the composer to have written the same fugue forty-eight times. So rather than point out the same-old stuff in each fugue, I'll limit my comments to how each one is different or special.

The second thing that Bach was trying to tell us is that this cycle is a very personal expression. It represents his core beliefs, values, and tastes. We know this because from time to time he used clever symbols to "compose" himself into the music. Although the degree to which *authorial inclusions* may be found in this cycle is far from settled, most writers agree that Bach decorated these preludes and fugues with his own identifying marks.

This fugue contains two such symbols. The first is a representation of Bach's number in the fourteen pitches of its subject. If you assign each letter of the alphabet a number (A=1, B=2, C=3), then B+A+C+H equals 14.

The second symbol is found in the fugue's 24 subject entries. These may represent the 24 preludes and 24 fugues in each volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. They may also represent the 24 keys (12 major and 12 minor) in the diatonic system.

By now you may have counted the subject entries for yourself and have come up with 25, not 24. That's because the short soprano entrance of m. 15 is what we call a *false subject*. It starts, then restarts, before the first start had had a chance to finish.

Well that about wraps it up for this fugue. If you found yourself being drawn to its dense strettis and old style counterpoint then you may wish to pursue these topics in the following related fugues:

- No. 8 in e-flat minor, book I
- No. 22 in b-flat minor, book I
- No. 2 in c minor, book II