

Performing Fugue No. 2

C minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 2, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

Subjects, countersubjects, dance tunes? How is the poor pianist to remember it all? To help *his* students remember, Ebenezer Prout attached humor to each subject of "the 48." His mnemonic for this one: *John Sebastian Bach sat upon a tack, but he soon got up again with a howl!*

I also like to characterize each idea with a distinct articulation. The main ideas in this fugue are expressed in the rhythm of its subject and the danciness of its leaps. The subject demands light, staccato eighths, while the scalar patterns of the countersubjects ask for a more legato approach.

It's easy to hear the different articulations that I've applied to bars 3-6, where only two voices are participating. Listen to the soprano as it mimics the crisp articulations of what the alto had introduced in bars 1-2. Now try to attach your ear to the alto voice in bars 3-6: the scales are legato, the tied-over values in bars 5-6 are carefully sustained against the dance rhythm of the soprano.

Another spot to listen to carefully is found in bars 9-11. Notice how Bach has used a quarter note to finish successive layers in his sequence (soprano beat 3, alto beat 1). That quarter is separated from the next iteration by an eighth rest. In the interest of clear counterpoint one must differentiate that quarter note from the eighth note in the companion voice. It is very important to hear the absence of the third voice for the brief duration of an eighth rest.

In summary: herein lies the essence of performing counterpoint: pay attention to the lengths of notes, characterize the material, and, *voilà*...Is it *crêpes Suzettes*? Well, at least it's a fugue!

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