

Performing Fugue No. 3

C-Sharp Major

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 3, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

This most virtuosic of fugues evokes the most virtuosic of the Baroque genres. Handle accordingly.

Bach loved the Italian music of his time, in particular the showy concerto style perfected by Antonio Vivaldi in Venice. How do we know that he liked it? Well, he copied lots of it. Bach had copied some of Vivaldi's concerto movements and transcribed them for the organ. He even transcribed Vivaldi's quadruple violin concerto for four harpsichords (that's a lot of plucking!). By way of tribute Bach wrote his own Italian-style concerti, the most notable of which are his six Brandenburgs.

One of Bach's most remarkable talents was his ability to assimilate musical genres normally associated with one medium and apply them to another. His transcription of Vivaldi concerti for the organ is a good example.

Another of his great achievements was the creation of a "Concerto in the Italian Style" for solo harpsichord (*Clavier Übung* Book II). *Clavier Übung* means, "keyboard practice." As the title suggests, the work incorporates all the idioms of concerto with only the harpsichordist's two hands to play them. So what's this got to do with a fugue? Are fugues not about the *German* style of counterpoint? Well, yes, but.

In this work Bach demonstrates the similarity between fugue with its alternation of subjects and episodes, and concerto grosso with its alternation of *ritornelli* and *solis*. *Ritornello* is "the part that returns."

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The opening and closing *ritornelli* of a concerto movement are not only in the same key but often identical in their thematic content as well. This is like the re-exposition of this fugue. Consider too the first movement of *Brandenburg No. 5*, or the first movement of the *Concerto in the Italian Style*.

Middle entries of a concerto's *ritornello* can be heard in different keys, dressed up or down according to taste. They may also feature different combinations of instruments developing material from the *ritornello* or digressing to music that is altogether new. Sometimes these solo sections present modulatory engines, much like the sequential episodes in a fugue.

So in this fugue Bach has transferred the idiomatic features of a concerto grosso to the fugue. The exposition and middle entries of the subject are like the concerto's *ritornelli*. The episodes featuring brilliant writing, modulatory sequences and, in this case, lots of disconcerting accidentals, are the *solis*. The fugue's showy brilliance and motoric rhythm strongly evoke the Italian style. Cap it all off with a literal recapitulation of the exposition, and you have a fugue in the style of an Italian concerto.