

Performing Fugue No. 6

D minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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To read this essay in its hypermedia format, click the "performance" link at the top right of the Shockwave movie at <http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/i06.html>.

The image displays a musical score for the first system of Fugue No. 6. The score is written for two staves: the upper staff in treble clef and the lower staff in bass clef. The key signature is D minor (two flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two main sections: the 'Subject' and the 'Countersubject'. The Subject is marked with 'a' and 'b' and includes a trill (tr) in bar 2. The Countersubject is marked with 'c' and 'd' and includes a trill (tr) in bar 29. The score is annotated with various performance markings, including trills (tr), staccato (stacc), and slurs. The Subject is also marked with 'a' and 'b' in the lower staff.

Subject: Fugue No. 6, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

Ebenezer Prout's mnemonic for this subject was just right. He joked that his students would remember it better if they sang it to the words: He trod upon my corns with heavy boots--I yelled! I particularly like the word "I" sung on the trill. And that trill is where I'd like to start.

This fugue is one of the rare instances where Bach included such interpretive marks. His instructions about trills and turns as well as staccato markings allow a more confident embellishment of this fugue than perhaps any other. His unusual articulation of m. 2, for example, gives the subject a kick that some might consider extreme had not the composer himself prescribed it.

Bach's fastidious ornamentation of this fugue extended so far as to specify that in bars 9-12 the artist should execute turns instead of trills (this for technical as well as musical reasons). Similarly he indicated a short trill with after-beat in the alto of bar 29. These ornaments are documented in his final version of the *Well-Tempered Clavier Book I*, dating from the 1740s (see the Henle or Barenreiter editions).

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This work is also out of the ordinary because it has a clearly articulated rounded binary form. This structure, somewhat unusual for the *WTC*, also shapes the E minor fugue of Book I.

This is how the rounded binary works. In bars 20-21 Bach has cadenced to A-minor (the dominant minor). In bars 42-43 he has cadenced to D minor. But for their transposition, the last four bars of each section are in fact identical. So the literal return of an earlier portion "rounds out" the otherwise binary form.

The second section begins by featuring mostly inverted subjects, moving from A minor back to D. Notice that the episode beginning in bar 27 contains a literal recapitulation of the opening subject (right down to the same key) only here it has been framed by the melodic inversions of itself. That episode is followed by a rearrangement of measures 8-11.

In summary, the rounded form of the D minor fugue makes it feel rather like one of those stylized dances in a Baroque suite--indeed a place where dance-like subjects such as this are apt to *tread upon one's corns!*