

Fugue No. 14

F-Sharp minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 14, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

In every question and every remark tossed back and forth between lovers who have not played out the last fugue, there is one question and it is this: "Is there someone new?"

Edna O'Brien
Long Distance, 1990

Each fugue of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* reveals Bach's love affair with counterpoint in something unique to it, something "new." The novelty of this fugue is in its tryst of styles: old with new.

David Ledbetter has observed the traits of *stile antico* in this fugue as pertaining to its meter, cadential trill in the subject, and "flexibly moulded lines recalling the D sharp minor fugue" (p. 298). As for the *stile moderno*, a chromatic ascent to the dominant sustains one of the more compelling (and daring) subjects in the 48.² Also modern in Bach's day were the moving sighs with which he has begun its countersubject (low voice).

As if to reinforce the contrasting origins--old with new--the fugue's subject, most like an arch, has been wed to a counter that is the inversion of an arch. As

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² The subject's ascent through five semitones is Bach's symbol for a crown. For more on this fascinating subject, read the analysis of the c#m fugue of Book I or the f#m fugue of Book II.

we shall see, the overall shape of the fugue is also that of an arch.

To Ledbetter's ear this fugue resembles the first *Kyrie* of the [*Mass in B minor*](#) in its rising chromatic line, which is used "to express supplication" (p. 198). He also cites Wessel (1955) who noted that, "progress by small intervals, and chromatic movement [is] expressive of sorrow and doubt" (p. 199).

Having begun this analysis by quoting the Irish novelist Edna O'Brien, I shall involve her in yet another comparison. O'Brien began her biography of James Joyce with a paragraph that, had it been set in Saxony instead of Dublin, would have applied equally to J. S. Bach:

Once upon a time there was a man coming down a road in Dublin and he gave himself the name of Dedalus the sorcerer, constructor of labyrinths and maker of wings for Icarus who flew so close to the sun that he fell, as the apostolic Dubliner James Joyce would fall into a world of words--from the "epiphanies" of youth to the epistomadologies of later years.

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* is proof enough that the apostolic Bach was a constructor of labyrinths. As for a maker of wings, this fugue carries one as close to the sun as he should dare to go. The warmth of its second development would have melted the wings of Icarus for sure. But Bach's fall, unlike that of Joyce's (into a world of words), was into the labyrinth of tones.

The epiphany of Bach's youth was counterpoint, especially that of the meticulously prepared dissonance and independent line. His model was the Renaissance motet. This influence can be discerned in his habit of tying notes from their consonant to dissonant states as harmonies unfold about them. As for rhythmic independence, one might easily deduce it by the variety of eighth-note groupings in the exposition's bridge passage. Yet Bach's combination of dissonance and rhythm was, even then, regarded as antiquated--therefore of the *stile antico*.

The influence of Palestrina, Heinrich Schütz *et al.* upon this fugue is heard in its essentially choral texture. For a composer sometimes accused of writing choral music in an instrumental style, this *Clavier* fugue is unblushingly choral in its conception.

If the fugue's vocal idiom is not immediately apparent, try singing each of its lines. Of particular beauty is that of the soprano. Go ahead and sing along! From its entry (m. 15) to its climax (m. 28) and denouement (m. 37), the soprano traces a magnificent arch sometimes relieved by receding waves in a rising tide of shape. The swell begins and ends on the tonic F-sharp and crests on the subdominant B an octave and a fourth above. This is an Olympian line to be sure, but vocal nonetheless.

The soprano's arch effects a transformation of density as well. From the crowded polyphony of its beginning, the texture opens a crack--enough to allow an inversion of the subject in the alto (m. 20). This entry (easily missed) is accompanied by no less than near inversion of the countersubject in the bass (m. 22).

The understatement of inversion in an inside voice is deliberate and should not, as warned professor Ledbetter, "be spoiled by the temptation to 'bring out the subject', if only to show that the player has noticed it" (p. 199). In the event that it may have been missed, the bass voice sings the same inversion with countersubject *recto* in m. 32.

This fugue is in f-sharp minor. Its first pitch bisects the octave, and Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. It is an appropriate chapel for the marriage of opposites: *stile antico* with *moderno*, up with down, *recto* with *inverso*, choral style with instrumental genre. It is, in the image of John Ciardi's poem, "Most Like an Arch this Marriage":

Most like an arch--an entrance which upholds
and shores the stone-crush up the air like lace.
Mass made idea, and idea held in place.