Performing Fugue No. 21

B-Flat Major
Well-Tempered Clavier Book I
Johann Sebastian Bach

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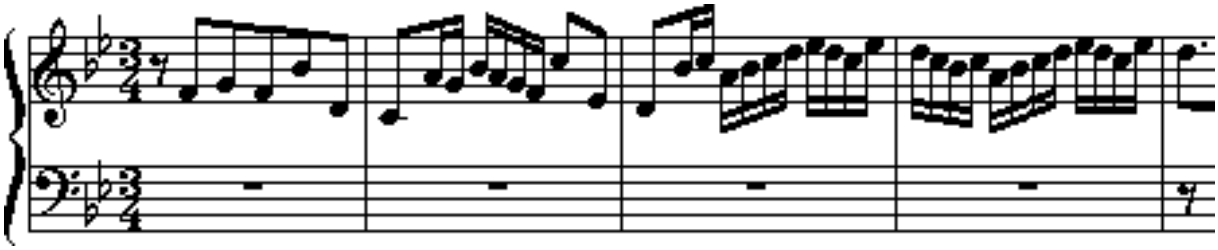
To read this essay in its hypermedia format, click the "performance" link at the top right of the Shockwave movie at http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/i21.html.



Subject: Fugue No. 21, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

For many piano students this is the first fugue in the *WTC* to be introduced. I'm glad it wasn't the first one I learned, because I still find it quite difficult.

What makes it so hard? Well, as in Bach's *Sinfonias* (Three-Part Inventions), the triple counterpoint appears to have been more important to Bach than what is playable on a keyboard. For all composers there is a tension between what is compositionally important and what is instrumentally convenient.

Amazingly, given the complexity of the counterpoint throughout his oeuvre, Bach's keyboard music lies, for the most part, quite nicely under the hand (as long as you have sixteen fingers, at least). But this fugue features a combination of technical and aural difficulties that are formidable to say the least. And in spite of this, it has to dance!

So, in case you haven't tried it yourself yet, let me point out some of the technical problems you can look forward to. First, in the subject, there are those pesky sixteenth-note passages--they look like nice little five-finger exercises, but the black keys (or white keys on some harpsichords) aren't in the most convenient of places. It turns out that they're really nasty to play evenly and with enough shape to not sound mechanical.

Secondly, in the first countersubject Bach throws a tie across the barline. Musically, this gives the fugue a nice lilt by emphasizing the final eighth-note of the bar. But when this tie is combined with the three sixteenth notes of the second countersubject, all kinds of finger trouble can follow. Just how do you

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make your finger hold that tied note while you're negotiating the intersecting sixteenths? Answer. Relax!

But a third challenge awaits us (good things often come in threes). In the third and fourth bars of each entry, the subject and second countersubject run in parallel sixths or thirds (depending on who's on top). Sometimes these sixteenths have to be played in parallel thirds by one hand. That's hard enough, but at other times its the sixteenths and eighths that have to be played by one hand. That's even more difficult! It is a great etude for finger independence though.

And now, for my favorite aural problem in Bach: downward leaps in a middle voice. This fugue is full of them, and they present an extraordinary challenge. In bars 22-23 Bach has placed the subject in the middle voice, the first countersubject on top, and the second countersubject on the bottom.

One caveat of counterpoint is to avoid large leaps, especially when they descend. The reason for this is that the ear finds it difficult to follow the descending voice after it has dropped.

The subject of this fugue features descending sixths at the end of each of its first two bars. Playing these leaps with one hand in an upper or lower voice doesn't present too much of a problem, but you must listen to it and make sure that the voice's continuity is audible.

When the subject has been placed in the middle voice, however, its descending leaps are extremely difficult to execute properly. Here the leaps have an added complication: they must be played by both hands (and I won't even mention the sixteenths in the bass). *Ladies and gentlemen, start your keyboards!*