

# Fugue No. 22

B-Flat minor

*Well-Tempered Clavier Book I*

Johann Sebastian Bach

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**Subject:** Fugue No. 22, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

This is a stretto fugue in straight imitation. In addition to its voicing, this fugue is set apart from the others for its:

- conservative counterpoint
- personal expression
- dramatic leap
- hyperstretto
- evocative prelude

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* contains two fugues for five voices of which this is the second and the *Kreuz* fugue of Book I (c-sharp minor) is the first. In that analysis I discuss the symbolism underlying the five voices, and conclude that Bach conceived of it as passion music. This fugue shares many of those traits. Bach has signed both works, both of which are masterpieces of tonal counterpoint.

## Conservative Counterpoint

The year 2004 marked the one-hundredth anniversary of the legendary choreographer George Balanchine. In celebration, PBS produced a retrospective where Mr. Balanchine can be heard to affirm: "We don't create; we just assemble what God created."

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Balanchine's humble attribution reminds us of Bach's purpose for music composition. He expressed that purpose by writing the following note in the margin of his Bible: "In a reverent performance of music God is always present with His grace." It is in that spirit that we begin this analysis with a comparison of counterpoint with choreography.

Counterpoint is like a dance. Imagine that you had the opportunity to observe one of Balanchine's rehearsals. Before the rehearsal begins, each dancer stretches and leaps, practicing his or her technique. They are energetic and individually graceful, but their movements are uncoordinated with each other.

It requires the imagination of a choreographer to turn the dancers' technique into art. His coordination moves each dancer to the foreground then back so that others may take her place. To bring one to the fore, others he may move in contrary motion, or in similar or parallel motion. While one leaps others may bow. Through his coordination the skill of each dancer is synergized; the many become one.

In this particular rehearsal Mr. Balanchine is representing a Bach fugue (he brilliantly choreographed many of Bach's works). These dances reveal his profound insight into musical structure, particularly that of imitative counterpoint. He represents the fugue's many voices (polyphony) by granting each dancer a degree of independence. While the many become one, the one also become many.

Contrast the Balanchine choreography with a crowd of people boarding a subway. In both instances there is a sense of united purpose. But only in the dance do individuals retain their personal autonomy. While the dancers are not literally independent, the illusion is that they are. On the subway there is not even an illusion, just a frantic sameness.

Good counterpoint is like a Balanchine choreography. While it is well beyond the scope of this study to explain exactly how the counterpoint of this fugue is perfect, we may summarize by observing that its voices are well choreographed. The choreography is shown in its balance of parallel and contrary motion. Other evidences include its predominance of stepwise motion and careful treatment of dissonance (tied notes only).

We cannot discuss the counterpoint of this fugue without observing that it was written in a style already very old, the *stile antico* of the high Renaissance. While the *stile antico* was not the latest fashion, it was very much admired. Three years after this fugue was written the Austrian theorist Johann Joseph Fux wrote *Gradus ad Parnassum* ("Steps to Parnassus"), a how-to manual on 16th-century species counterpoint. In Greek mythology Parnassus, the mountain dwelling of the Muses, represented a state of perfection.

Seventeen years after its publication, *Gradus* was translated from Latin to German in Leipzig, the city where Bach lived. The translator was Bach's friend, Lorenz Christoph Mizler. At the time of his death, Bach's library contained a copy of the untranslated Latin version of *Gradus*. Thus, while Bach is known to have admired Fux's work, this fugue proves that he had, long before Fux codified the steps, already found his way to Parnassus.

## Personal Expression

In the earlier fugue for five voices (c-sharp minor), Bach's had expressed his personal creed: *Christus Coronabit Crucigeros*. The relationship between these two fugues had been noted from the 1890's when Busoni showed that the c-sharp minor subject could be combined with this subject in double counterpoint. More recently David Ledbetter observed that the contour of both subjects is *chiastic* (in the shape of a cross).<sup>2</sup> This is a melody that descends, leaps above the first pitch then descends again.

The extent to which this fugue expresses a religious devotion is open to debate. That it expresses devotion to something is beyond debate. The evidence is found in the musical signature with which Bach has signed both this fugue, and the c-sharp minor. Bach's name is found in the alto voice of mm. 58-59 (I have marked the score).

Even they who consider a religious symbolism to be fanciful should agree that the *stile antico* itself held a profound spiritual significance for Bach. His reverence for the antique style was articulated by Carl Philipp Emanuel, who indicated that his father admired music that was complex, serious, and profound.

Why did Bach admire the complex and profound, but old-fashioned, style? There is reason enough to be found in the idealized counterpoint that the *stile antico* represents. But I believe that another reason, albeit circumstantial, can be found in a traumatic personal loss that Bach experienced at the age of ten.

When his parents died, young Sebastian was cast upon the care of his older brother Johann Christoph, a student of the great contrapuntist Johann Pachelbel. While in Christoph's home the younger sibling was exposed to counterpoint of the south German tradition. He learned this style by copying works most notably by Froberger and Kerll. The child Bach sneaked into his brother's forbidden library and copied these works by moonlight.

Bach's immersion in the *stile antico* continued five years later when he attended the *Michaelisschule* in Lüneburg where he was a treble in the choir. Of this experience Ledbetter wrote that the young Bach "had access to one of the richest seventeenth-century collections of polyphonic and figural choral music in Germany" (p. 129).

Christoph Wolff has accounted for Bach's veneration of the *stile antico* by noting that it was "rooted in the unchangeable rules of harmony that have always existed, are existing, and will be so, as long as the edifice and the principles on which it rests do not change, may music as a phenomenon change as it will" (1991).

In his maturity Bach returned often to the "edifice" of the *stile antico*. That he would have considered its immutable rules to be a force countervailing losses experienced in his adolescence is not beyond the realm of possibility. The principles of counterpoint may have provided him with solace through the many personal losses that were his continual lot. Bach employed the *stile antico* in some of his most heartfelt affirmations of belief, including portions of the B-Minor Mass and *Clavier-Übung* series.

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<sup>2</sup> David Ledbetter, *Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: the 48 Preludes and Fugues* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 225.

## Dramatic Leap

In this fugue, and in the c-sharp minor, the *stile antico* is the medium for presentation of a dissonant but powerfully expressive interval. In both cases that interval rises between the second and third pitches of the subject. Whereas the former fugue employs a diminished fourth, the subject of this fugue leaps the interval of a ninth (10th in the answer). This is the largest leap of any subject in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

It is not overstating the drama of this gesture to say that it would have caused even the most daring of Bach's contemporaries to take notice, as we should too. I shall take two approaches in discussing this leap: one structural and the other affective.

Structurally the leap is what makes this fugue. Without it, the subject would have failed. While Bach could have stripped out the octave and risen only the interval of a second, given the rhythmic simplicity of his subject, this would not have provided sufficient interest for the 72 measures to follow. So the compound interval (8va + 2nd) is *sine qua non* of this fugue.

But if a daring leap makes the fugue, it also presents its challenge. Given that Bach is working in a five-voiced texture, the problem becomes how to compose such a large leap without crossing other voices and confusing the ear as to which voice the leap belongs?

The answer is that he has avoided other leaps. Study the music and you will find that ninety-nine percent of it consists of conjunct motion. This is Bach's secret ingredient; it is why our ears are able to track each voice and perceive its leap as belonging to the subject. As if to leave no doubt about the continuation of each melodic strand, Bach drew lines connecting several leaps to consequent steps in the same voice.

In terms of its emotion, the leap represents one of the most extreme affectations in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Bach's student Kirnberger linked it with despair (1782). In his 1909 study of Bach's vocal music, Pirro associated the minor ninth with "great distress."

Ledbetter (2002) observes that the leap is "a good example of an instrumental piece using a poignant interval to gain a 'speaking' expression" (p. 225). "What appealed to Bach," he writes, "was the expressive tension possible between the objective control inherent in the *stile antico* and the tortured personal anguish of second-practice dissonance" (p. 224).

## Hyperstretto

We began this analysis by observing that this is a stretto fugue. Its focus upon stretto is immediately revealed in an extraordinary application of the technique to the exposition itself. Stretto is normally reserved for middle entries (following the exposition).

It is theorized that Bach began many of his fugues with a brilliantly conceived fragment, what Laurence Dreyfus (1996) has described as a *fugal complex*. The hypothesized fragment would have represented a contrapuntal challenge about which the whole fugue would revolve, and resolve. It is as if the composer awoke each morning, stretched, and asked himself: "What contrapuntal problem

shall I solve on this fine day?"

The challenge of *this* fugue is hyperstretto. The fragment is found in the *stretto maestrale* of mm. 67-71. These must have been the first measures to be composed; everything else exists in order to build this moment.

Recall from our analysis of the first fugue in this cycle, that stretto involves the subject accompanying itself. This means that a second voice begins the subject before the first voice has finished. The shorter the interval, the closer the stretto is to being hyper. The ultimate hyperstretto involves two voices stating the subject simultaneously. Can you see where Bach has done this? Yes that would be in m. 55, which contains simultaneous statements of the subject and its answer.

A quick examination of the timeline reveals that in each successive episode subject entries are more condensed. The exposition requires seventeen measures. The 1st development contracts presentation to ten (one voice omitted). Then in mm. 46-54 of the 2nd episode all five voices state the subject in the span of nine measures. What remains for the 3rd development but episodes of hyperstretto beginning in m. 55 and m. 67? In the latter segment the subject is presented, in all five voices, in the span of an incredible eight beats!

### **Evocative Prelude**

One could hardly inspire a more lively debate among musicians than to suggest that keys evoke certain moods. There are those who scoff at the notion, others take it more seriously. Without becoming mired in details, here are the facts.

Historically, musicians have rather consistently adhered to the idea that particular keys are at least *capable* of connoting emotional states. While there is no consensus as to whether affect is a by-product of key, there is universal agreement that composers have constructed, and perpetuated, such links. In the Baroque period, sharp and flat keys were thought to evoke opposite moods.

Commitment to this idea began to crumble with the invention of tuning systems that allowed pieces to be played in every key. Thus the *Well-Tempered Clavier* finds itself at the heart of the debate, and Bach's attitude of critical importance.

So what was Bach's attitude? Well, there are indications that, with the more common keys, he was ambivalent. We find him, for example, transposing works from common keys to more rare ones, which would seem to indicate that he didn't place much stock in emotive connotations.

On the other hand there are some keys, like *b*m and *f*#m, that Bach obviously associated with human suffering in general and Christ's passion in particular. *B-flat minor* (as in this prelude and fugue) is another of those anguished keys.

Bach resorted to *b-flat minor* so rarely that any instance is sure to invite comparison. In his study of Bach's vocal works, Eric Chafe discovered that *b-flat minor* was used "in recitatives for darkness, the cross, and suffering," while *e-flat minor* was associated with "extreme torment"; both of these keys tending toward the extreme subdominant side of the tonal labyrinth.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Ledbetter adds that:

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Ledbetter, 116.

"These are the keys used in the *Credo* of the *B minor Mass* for the dead awaiting the resurrection (*Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum*)."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most poignant use of b-flat minor is heard in Christ's twenty-second, and final, utterance of the *St. Matthew Passion*: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>5</sup>

In consideration of the plausible links between mood and key, it is remarkable that the b-flat minor prelude of Book II contains extended passages in quotation of the b-flat minor prelude of Book I. The significance of this I leave to minds more clever than mine, but no less prone to conjecture.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 22 begins with these same words.