

Fugue No. 18

G-Sharp minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 18, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

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Stubbornness Lands Bach in Jail

What do you think of obstinate people? At one time or another each of us has been that way, hopefully with good reason. There are two kinds of stubbornness: that which clings to pride, and that which upholds an ideal. The first is stubbornness of ego, the second of principle.

Bach is sometimes characterized as a bullheaded, sometimes angry, man--which he sometimes was. But it is important to understand that his anger was, with one notable exception, of the proper kind. The exception occurred when the Duke of Saxe-Weimar wouldn't let him resign. Bach lost his temper, made the Duke mad, and was imprisoned for almost four weeks. The crime was not that he wanted to leave, but that he forced the issue.

Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, who's father studied with Bach shortly after the incident, intimates that Bach began composition of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* while in the Weimar jail. So the silver lining is that we might not be listening to this joyous fugue if Bach hadn't gotten angry once in awhile!

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When Bach betrayed his stubborn streak on later occasions, he was usually upholding a principle, often with respect to obligations (sometimes trifling, other times of substance) that his employers were trying to renege. On these occasions he followed the advice of the brilliant Bible commentator, Abraham Calov:

Anger must exist, but take care that it occur as is proper and in your command, and that you express anger not for your own sake but for the sake of your office and for God's sake.... For yourself you must show no anger, no matter how severe the offense has been. However, where it concerns your office, *you must show anger, even if you yourself have not been wronged.*²

These words may have resonated with Bach because of his embarrassing experience in the Weimar jail. We know that he valued them because he underlined the passage in his Bible, marking each line with quotation marks for emphasis.³ For special emphasis he wrote *N.B.* (for *Nota Bene*, "note well") beside the clause that I have italicized.

Old-Fashioned Preacher

One area where Bach was particularly obstinate was in his belief that there are good and proper ways of doing things, and ways that are wrong. He expressed this, compositionally, in what many of his contemporaries considered to be a mulish attachment to counterpoint--things like fugues. At the time Bach wrote this fugue, the form was already double decades out of fashion!⁴ The more progressive people of his day, including his sons, were especially amused by his belief that counterpoint expresses the reality of divine purpose and order.

But these were the progressives, the "enlightened" ones. Excepting his fondness for fugue, Bach's views were in step with most contemporary authorities, of which I quote three. One of the founding principles of the St. Thomas School, where he taught, was: "to guide the students, through the euphony of music, to the contemplation of the divine." As defined by the *Großes Universal Lexicon*, the largest and most influential encyclopedia of Bach's generation, music is: "everything that creates harmony, that is, order...and in this

² Calov's commentary on Matthew 5:25-26, from the Sermon on the Mount.

³ One of the great additions to Bach scholarship in recent years was the discovery of his Bible. Here's how it happened. At the time of his death, the inventory of Bach's library listed a three-volume work called *Calovii Schrifften* ("Works of Calovius"). Before World War II these were rumored to exist somewhere in America. In 1972 that they were located in the library of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. The *Calovii Schrifften* were found to contain Luther's complete Bible with commentary by Luther, edited by Wittenberg University's *professor primarius*, Abraham Calov. To the delight of scholars, they also contained numerous underlinings, marks of emphasis, and marginal annotations, verified as Bach's own.

⁴ Christoph Wolff notes that "Niccolo Pasquali, writing in the mid-1750s, says that it is forty years since they [fugues] were in vogue." *Johann Sebastian Bach, the Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 84.

sense it is used by those who assert that the whole universe is music."⁵ Finally, Bach's fellow member of the Society for Musical Science, Georg Vensky, expressed a similar thought:

God is a harmonic being. All harmony originates from his wise order and organization.... Where there is no conformity, there is also no order, no beauty, and no perfection. For Beauty and perfection consists in the conformity of diversity.⁶

It is a small step from belief that music is beautiful because it conforms to divine order to the position that it also *reveals* that order. By tapping into the primal mechanism of creation, what Forkel called "order, coherence, and proportion," Bach believed that well-crafted music affirms both the existence and attributes of the Creator.⁷ In the words of the eminent scholar and biographer, Christoph Wolff: "He understood the basic materials of music to be directly related to the physical design of the universe."⁸

For Bach, music had a preaching function; its purpose was to proclaim the nature of God. Revealed sacramentally in the person of Christ, and by the common grace of creation, this nature is fundamentally realized in the goodness and order of that creation, its functions, continuity, and relationships. These relationships bind the Creator to creation, and all things to each other. Not just liturgical music, but all music had this purpose. Wolff again: "For Bach, theological and musical scholarship were two sides of the same coin: the search for divine revelation, or the quest for God."⁹

But what, you may ask, about this fugue? It is a dance, is it not? And how could the dance be remotely sacramental? How does this fugue preach; what is its homily?

In the preaching tradition of Bach's day, Scripture (i.e. the text) was considered to have many layers of meaning. The most obvious was literal, followed by allegorical and tropological, like the layers of an onion.

Thinking of Bach's fugue as a text, its literal meaning is found in the notes on the page and what we hear. Assuming that it has no allegory, it still has its sermon. To hear it, we'll need to listen in subtler harmonic tones, with more "Pythagorean partials."

⁵ Bach was probably familiar with this definition because it was first published in Leipzig during his tenure there.

⁶ *Musikalische Bibliothek* 2.3 (1742): 63 f., quoted in Wolff, *Learned Musician*, 466.

⁷ In writing the first biography of Bach, Johann Nikolaus Forkel had access to Bach's living friends, students, and relatives. These told Forkel that Bach learned to "think musically" by transcribing the works of Vivaldi. Forkel went on to define "thinking musically" by the terms *Ordnung*, *Zusammenhang*, and *Verhältnis*. Christoph Wolff observes that the breadth of meaning to these words is difficult to capture in English. He proposes that they imply order/organization, coherence/connection/continuity, and proportion/relation/correlation. From *Learned Musician*, 170-171.

⁸ Wolff, *Ibid.*, 339.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

Consider the fugue's *proportions*: antecedent and consequent bookends of the 1st subject in retrograde, and the head and tail contours of the 2nd subject inverted. And what of the fugue's *organization*: two subjects, with distinct expositions, seemingly opposite and irreconcilable, but ultimately developed in tandem. As for *coherence, connection, continuity, relation* and *correlation*--oh my! Do we have enough time to scratch the surface?

In all of these, Bach preached that the fugue is good, true, and right. It is good because it mirrors the goodness of creation, which is also coherent, connected, orderly, and well-proportioned. Bach's sermon is that things are true not by our definition, but God's. The fugue is right because it conforms to, and reveals, the divine attributes of goodness, truth, and rightness.

Rejoicing in the Cross

But what of symbol and allegory--the onion's deeper layers? Can the fugue preach that type of sermon too?

We may catch the faintest echo of an answer to these questions in Bach's response to the joy of Israel following her miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh's army: "Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing."¹⁰ Next to this passage Bach wrote: *Note well this first prelude for two choirs to be performed to the honor of God.*

This fugue exudes that very same joy, but not without the passionate counter-reflection of its second subject. In musical terms, these ideas are so affectively opposite that they seem not to belong together. But Bach has said that they *do indeed belong*. To "preach" that point he has cleverly joined them. Why?

The image shows a musical score for the g#m Fugue, WTC Book II, measures 97-100. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features two subjects: the 1st Subject and the 2nd Subject. The 1st Subject is shown in its original form and its retrograde. The 2nd Subject is shown in its original form and its melodic inversion. Hand-drawn circles and arrows highlight these relationships.

Motivic Complex: Chiastic Structure of the g#m Fugue, WTC Book II

As we have seen before, this composer's reasons are often theological--having to do with the paradox of Christ's passion. This dance, like the more somber passion fugues, contains a chromatic descent of the tetrachord.¹¹ Like them, this fugue also transforms the descent by melodic inversion. It may be exuberant, but it realizes the same cross and crown that Bach made explicit in canon BWV 1077.

¹⁰ The complete song of Moses and Miriam is found in Exodus 15.

¹¹ The passion fugues are the c#-minor and b-minor of Book I and the f#-minor of Book II.

Study the motivic complex (preceding page) and you'll understand what I mean. Notice the melodic inversion of its second subject (high voice). Now study the first subject (low voice). Observe how each of its two halves concludes with a retrograde of its beginning. There can be no mistaking the imagery as *chiastic*--Bach's counterpoint of the cross.

But what did Bach think was so important about the cross? Why did he repeatedly symbolize it in his counterpoint? Although Ephesians 2:14-16 is not underlined in his Bible, it expresses the heart of Bach's sermon, explaining why his counterpoint so often reconciles opposites.

For he [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.

There are three crosses in the motivic complex, and five statements of that complex (mm. 97-139). With the German word for sharp being *Kreuz*, there are also five "crosses" in the fugue's key signature. Do you think it possible that Bach's sermon has an allegorical meaning related to Golgotha? But if the sermon is about the cross, the symbol of Christ's death, why is the fugue joyful?

Again, the answer can be found in Bach's Bible. I John 1:7 explains how the cross "purifies us from all sin." Because of the cross (Christians believe), God forgives the sinner, which is something to be joyful about. After this verse, Bach highlighted 32 lines of Calov's commentary, concluding with:

Come before God securely and joyfully, call unto Him and hope confidently and without doubt . . . as Saint Paul says in Ephesians III. Through Jesus Christ we have joyfulness and entry with all assurance through faith in Him.

Subject of Satire

One trait of the Enlightenment, a trait still with us, is a resistance to thinking about music in the way that I have just described this fugue.¹² I have heard analyses like this one described as "alchemical, gnostic, occult," all the things

¹² Richard Taruskin's strong words about the essential Bach ("Facing Up, Finally, to Bach's Dark Vision") are relevant:

Anyone exposed to Bach's full range . . . knows that the hearty, genial, lyrical Bach of the concert hall is not the essential Bach. The essential Bach was an avatar of a pre-Enlightened—a violently anti-Enlightened—temper. His music was a medium of truth, not beauty. And the truth he served was bitter. His works persuade us—no, *reveal* to us-- that the world is filth and horror, that humans are helpless, that life is pain, that reason is a snare Such music cannot be prettified in performance without essential loss. For with Bach—the essential Bach—there is no "music itself." His concept of music derived from and inevitably contained The Word, and the word was Luther's.

that prompt our deterministic, scientific, and empirical defenses to come into play. But I have purposefully described this fugue as a sermon, and attached a Christian reading, for a reason.

If nothing else, the notations that Bach made in his Bible ought to have plunged us into his world, a world so foreign as to be nearly incomprehensible to most moderns. I wanted to contrast, in the most vivid language, an old way of thinking with a new. You see, virtually all historians agree that Bach's generation was a time of transition. An old way was ending, and a new way beginning. This is true philosophically, politically, scientifically, economically, and religiously. It is also true about musical styles.

No incident more dramatically illustrates Bach's commitment to the preaching power of music (the old way) than his 1747 meeting with Frederick the Great (apostle of the new way). In discussing this event I want to recommend to you a new book on the subject by the former managing editor of *Time, Life and People*, James R. Gaines. The book is called *Evening in the Palace of Reason* (HarperCollins, 2005). You might consider what follows to be a review of this illuminating and smart book, with all quoted passages, except where noted, being of Mr. Gaines's words.¹³

I am obliged to begin my critique by criticizing a provocative statement that recently appeared in a review of Mr. Gaines's work by the *New York Times*: "In a later, more liberated age, Frederick (1712-86) might have been sympathetically known as 'Frederick the Gay'."

This sentence implies that Prussia's Philosopher King and apostle of Enlightenment was, by the standards of our own liberated and enlightened age, repressed. The truth is that Frédéric (as he preferred) was in the modern sense both liberated and enlightened--more so than most moderns could imagine.

Which makes of Frederick the Great's 1747 encounter with Johann Sebastian Bach, pious Lutheran, church musician, faithful husband, and father of twenty, perhaps the opening salvo in the culture wars. If not a clash of world-views, Gaines spins it in that direction, his plot predicated upon the assumption that the elderly Bach was, to Frederick, a "subject" for experimentation and humiliation.¹⁴

This was the same Frederick who proclaimed that contrapuntal music reeked of religion.¹⁵ With their sacred symbols, allegories, and commitment to composition as a type of universal truth, Bach's fugues exemplified *l'infame* that Frederick sought to crush.

Whereas, for Bach, music must conform to God's laws because its purpose is to glorify him, to Frederick, writes Gaines, "there were no immutable, divine laws, only those which arose from human experience." Accordingly he forbade his court musicians to write fugues, preferring instead the *stile galant*, which

¹³ This portion of the analysis first appeared in the December 2005 issue of *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*. www.touchstonemag.com.

¹⁴ Not two years had elapsed since Frederick's occupation of Leipzig in the Second Silesian War. Bach's visit occurred six months after the last Prussian troops had left his city.

¹⁵ Frederick's actual words, as reported by Burney, were "*Oh! this smells of the church*" (emphasis Burney's). As cited in Michael Marissen's "The Theological Character of J. S. Bach's Musical Offering," from Daniel R. Melamed's (ed.) *Bach Studies* 2.

according to his court philosopher, Voltaire, existed for no more reason than to entertain.

But the King closeted another pretext for humiliating Bach. The aging composer was of the same generation as Frederick's too religious father, Frederick William, now seven years deceased. To the young king, Bach must have represented, writes Gaines, "the backward, boorish, superstitious world on which Frederick had turned his back, but which still haunted his sleep."

Truth be told, Frederick had reason to be haunted. Within recent memory his father had instructed his clergy to sharpen the crown prince's sense of guilt while the memory of Lieutenant Hans Hermann Katte's beheading was "right fresh." Gaines's inference, that Frederick was forced to watch Katte's execution not because they were co-conspirators but because they were lovers, is based on the historian Thomas Carlyle's assertion that the young prince had a proclivity for "ways not pleasant to his Father and not conformable to the Laws of the Universe."

Or as the father wrote to his son: "I cannot abide an effeminate fellow who has no manly tastes, who cannot ride or shoot . . . and wears his hair curled like a fool." It was a tendency that Frederick William determined to eradicate, writes Gaines, "by a degree of violence perhaps unique in the annals of kings and their crown princes."

No wonder Frederick developed a cruel and sadistic streak; he had reason enough for a palace of treason. If years earlier he had conspired with Katte to overthrow his father, he would later require, Gaines implies, the help of court harpsichordist Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach to humiliate *his* father, Johann Sebastian.

Although Frederick was an amateur composer, he was, according to Arnold Schoenberg, incapable of writing a subject resistant enough to development to defeat the elder Bach, renowned for his skill as an improviser. So Frederick enlisted Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's assistance in creating what has come to be known as the royal theme.¹⁶ His plan was to play this theme to the elder Bach, with the request that he make of it a three-voiced fugue (read "relic") on the spot.¹⁷

¹⁶ Gaines's more tenuous theories are that Frederick (a) was incapable of composing the royal theme without assistance, therefore (b) enlisted the aid of Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, who (c) joined the plot out of some degree of animus against his father. With respect to (a), we know that Frederick's musicians sometimes "filled in" his "compositions." Aside from that, Gaines's strongest argument is Schoenberg's opinion on the matter. As for (b), if Frederick required assistance, he could have gotten it from any number of competent musicians on his staff, including the Benda brothers or Quantz. There is no direct evidence that Carl Philipp Emanuel was an accomplice. Gaines's intuition of a plot (c) is fiction. While he infers from circumstance, the preponderance of evidence says otherwise. Carl Philipp Emanuel said and wrote many things about his father, all of them positive. That said, the satirical implications of the *Musical Offering*, first theorized by Michael Marissen (see fn. 15), are indeed plausible.

¹⁷ Gaines follows Schoenberg's lead here. The theory that Frederick hatched the theme, with Carl Philipp's collusion, to spring it on the elder Bach and trip him up, is contradicted by Forkel's assertion that Johann Sebastian took the initiative in asking the King to propose a subject. Obviously Bach was not quaking in his boots. Forkel further indicates that the King complimented the "learned manner" in which his subject had handled his subject. If Frederick

So Bach arrived in Potsdam. Having endured the jarring coach ride, tired and dusty, the elderly man was accorded no time to shave or bathe, but immediately summoned to the royal chamber, rehearsal in progress, with Frederick's agitated aside to the assembled musicians: "Gentlemen, old Bach is come." What history did not record (suggests Gaines) was "Let's amuse ourselves."

To moderns, the amusement, veiled deep within the connotations of Frederick's theme, is difficult to apprehend. But to Bach the point was apparent: Something precious to him was the subject of satire. Frederick was mocking the core of Sebastian's musical and theological universe.¹⁸

The first clue would have been the royal theme's descending half steps. Bach would have expected five semitones, his arcane symbol for Christ's passion and cross (like this motive, worked out many times before). He had often transformed this metaphor, by motion in the opposite direction, to represent the resurrection and crown awaiting those who carry Christ's cross (a musical expression of his motto: *Christus Coronabit Crucigeros*).

Instead of reversing directions, Frederick followed the fourth descent with four more in rapid fire--as if to scoff, "no cross, no crown," and certainly no resurrection. But the dignified Bach rose to the occasion, immediately improvising the required three-voiced fugue--in view of its treacherous subject, a stunning achievement. Astonished, Frederick demanded another, in six parts, to which Sebastian demurred that this required preparation.

Preaching the Last Word

How Bach must have stewed on the ride home. While the King had been, formally, complimentary, taking an interest in Bach's opinion of his new fortepianos, the royal theme must have played itself incessantly in his head. With each playing, perhaps, he became more stubborn, maybe even angry. Perhaps he thought of the *Nota Bene* that he had written beside Psalm 119:158: "I see the despisers and it grieves me that they do not keep your word."¹⁹ If angry, it would not have been that of a personal affront. You see, Frederick had insulted not Bach, but his office: cantor and *Kapellmeister* of St. Thomas Church, Leipzig.

didn't like the learned manner, he could at least appreciate the intellect behind it.

¹⁸ The official Potsdam press release related that, "Mr. Bach found the theme propounded to him so exceedingly beautiful that he intends to set it down on paper as a regular fugue and have it engraved on copper" (as quoted in Wolff *Learned Musician*, 425). Frederick's newspaper could hardly have reported otherwise. While the theme is indeed beautiful, it became so by virtue of Bach's subsequent treatment. Brilliant though we now consider it to be, there is no denying both its contrapuntal obstinacy and satirical tendencies. Schoenberg was probably correct in his intuition that the royal theme was designed to resist improvisation.

¹⁹ The word "loathing" in the NIV is more stern than the RSV's "grief" with which Howard Cox, editor of the facsimile edition of the *Calov Bible*, rendered Luther's translation into English. I am curious as to the degree of severity that Bach himself would have read in Luther. Which raises an interesting question. Would Bach, in consideration of his apparent valuation of this verse, and knowing Frederick's attitude toward "the Word," have viewed the latter with the NIV's "loathing" or the RSV's "grief?" One thing is for certain, he dared not express either, else "consecrate" his "sacrifice" from another jail.

It would have been impossible to know Bach's thoughts but for the telling way he soon would act them out. Upon his return home, Bach forwarded his sovereign a souvenir: a folio of canons, trio sonata, and fugues that he called *A Musical Offering*--satire of a subtler sort.

First there are the pregnant theological terms *weihen* and *Opfer* with which Bach graced the title page. Usually translated "dedicated" and "offering," they actually mean "consecrated" and "sacrifice." The *Offering's* dedication in German, a tongue that Frederick despised and barely understood, tells us Bach's opinion of the chic and fawning French. But Bach preferred the vernacular, the good German into which Martin Luther, while himself in prison, had translated the Bible that Bach routinely underlined and noted well.

The *Offering's* sonata *da chiesa* (in a "church style") exposes the shelves, emptied of sacred forms, in Frederick's bulging library at Sanssouci. If the king detested Christianity, Bach's ten canons (Commandments), particularly the riddle with its Gospel clue, "Seek and you will find," were calculated to make a "counter" point.

Especially sardonic would have been the modulating canon with its never-ending illusion of rising keys that return from whence they came. Bach's cryptic Latin, "as the notes rise, so may the King's glory," leaves little doubt as to the composer's meaning. But the *summa* would have been the promised six-voice fugue, curiously called by the antique word *Ricercar*, implying strict observance of contrapuntal law. Gaines interprets:

All of these were of a piece, and this is what they say: Beware the appearance of good fortune, Frederick, stand in awe of a fate more fearful than any this world has to give, seek the glory that is beyond the glory of this fallen world, and know that there is a law higher than any king's . . . by which you and every one of us will be judged.

There is no evidence that Bach's "sacrifice" was anything but wasted--on Frederick or his contemporaries. In three years the maker of fugues would meet his own Maker, having faithfully upheld his motto even when it cost: *Christ will crown those who carry his cross*. In the following century his fugues would be forgotten, and his memory eclipsed by much more entertaining sons.

Frederick died lonely and disillusioned, despising Mozart's operas more than he had Bach's fugues. His identity was eventually stolen by the Nazis, with formal proclamation of the Third Reich coinciding with Hitler's laying flowers at Frederick's tomb. The memory of this patron of the arts was turned to propaganda, with Frederick's likeness religiously plastered alongside those of Bismarck and Hitler.

Before the Führer's suicide, Göring dredged up Frederick's bones, "precious Teuton relics" (Gaines calls them) for safekeeping in the Harz Mountains. There they remained until Chancellor Kohl, in celebration of German reunification, returned them to Sanssouci (with a gaggle of Baroque-clad activists in attendance to reinstate Frédéric the Gay as propaganda).

Who had the last word? In his later years Bach knew full well that his music was not in vogue. Although he had demonstrated on several occasions that he could write in the popular style, he rarely did so, continuing to favor contrapuntal music long after it had fallen out of favor. Why?

I think it comes down to that stubborn streak. Bach knew that time would indeed tell. He knew that his counterpoint had profound spiritual substance that would, someday, be welcomed and treasured. He had appropriated these words, having marked them well in his Bible: "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."²⁰

²⁰ | Timothy 6:12. Bach also added his mark of emphasis to the following lines of commentary on this verse. I believe that Calov is here quoting Luther, although I can't tell for certain.

My hymn sounds like this: Give to God the glory which is due to the one true living God, the only glory, praise, and honor in heaven and on earth; He is the only God . . . a God above all gods, Lord of all lords, who created heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in it, who holds in His hand all kingdoms on earth, building them up and striking them down as He will, who gives life and breath to all men on earth, who forms and guides the innermost hearts, senses, and thoughts of all kings and all other men on earth as it pleases Him, who alone provides to everything all physical and spiritual purpose without which no one can have or for a moment retain body, life, wisdom, strength, health, power, wealth, or any possessions. To Him, said Moses, give glory, that is, acknowledge Him to be the Lord who creates and effects everything and from whom alone all blessings flow. . . . Therefore rejoice, Christian, and everyone who acknowledges God's work, for such things are said and written in great consolation to everyone among us, if you believe the truth that Christ is ordained as Lord over all.