

Fugue No. 24

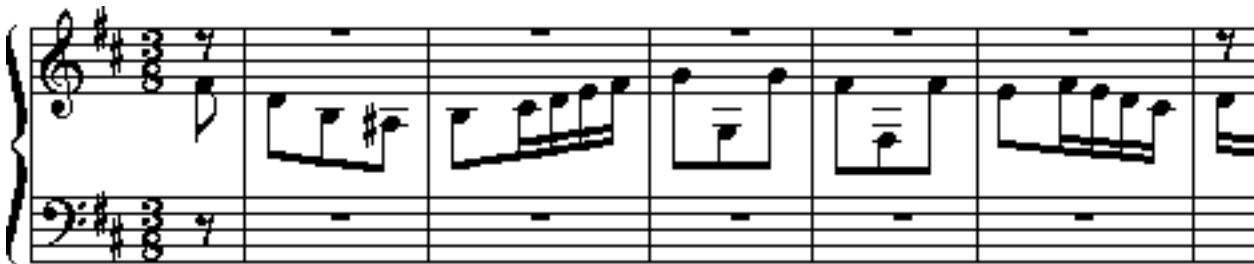
B minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book II

Johann Sebastian Bach

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To read this essay in its hypermedia format, go to the Shockwave movie at <http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/ii24.html>.



Subject: Fugue No. 24, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* concludes with a dance of uncommon joy, composed for the glory of God and the re-creation of the soul.

A Dance of Uncommon Joy

This fugue is a *passepied*, a circular line dance in quick three, with roots in the common branle of Breton. Dancers of the *Branle du Haut Barrois* dressed as shepherds and shepherdesses, and of the *Branle des Ermites* as monks. The *Branle des Lavandieres* mimics the maid, while the *Branle de Flambeaux* dares passing of torches between partners.²

During the reign of Louis XIV the branle entered polite society as the *passepied*, in consequence of its pastoral origin especially fashionable at weddings. This is how Bach would have known the form, his dance of choice for the connubial bliss of the *Wedding Cantata*.³

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² The *passepied* is also called the *Bretagne*, from its province of origin. Dolmetsch contends that it came from sailors of the Basse-Bretagne area and was also called the fast minuet or rigaudon.

³ Audio links for the cantatas come via bach-cantatas.com: BWV 202 by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Soprano)/Dart, the complete BWV 22 and BWV 49 by P.J. Leusink/HBC & NBC. The 4th movement of BWV 22 via link to monteverdiproductions.co.uk: James Oxley (Tenor)/Gardiner.

leaps of his subject in mm. 29-30, 57-58, and 84-85.⁸ The crossing of voices, normally forbidden, is excusable only in overflowing joy.

The point of the *passepied*, exactly! Both as music and dance, the object is joy. Indeed, the desire of all dance (and music too) is empathy--to what extent can one body resonate to the emotion felt by the body of another--not just by lip and breast.

This fugue dangles a tantalizing invitation in that regard, hints and clues of an intensely devotional mood at its moment of composition--a mood of triumphal anticipation and celebration. So we inquire of the source: why the joy, and can it be reconciled with overarching themes of the cycle that seem, superficially, to be at odds? The answer is heard in *passepieds* of an otherworldly sort. But first we need to understand the problem.

For the Glory of God

Here's the problem. This dance is in B minor, Bach's signifier of Christ's passion and the obvious connotation of its counterpart in Book I. The gravitas of the former work's three crosses, Bach's tone poem of Golgotha, seems hardly reconcilable with the dance we hear now.⁹ The disconnect has not escaped notice by any commentator, Ledbetter's being typical:

The equivalent fugue in Book I treats B minor in the very serious character of the key that completes the chromatic octave and is therefore expressive of the fullness of human suffering, with elaborate chromaticism and chiasmic outlines (p. 332).

Accordingly Ledbetter sounds a note of caution: this fugue may have nothing to do with passion, emanating rather from the *galant manier* of French dance (which the *passepied* is), particularly the flute (another of its pastoral connotations). Some may see Dr. Ledbetter's alternate reading best. If so, and Christocentric connotations have been tiresome, now is the moment to stop reading. Just enjoy the fugue for the dance it is--end of story.

But I suspect that you may agree; the French *galant* is not *the* end. There is a relationship between the devotional conclusion of Book I and the joy of Book II. Both fugues are profoundly steeped in the eschatological assumptions of Lutheranism, its particular teachings on the destiny of the soul, and its emphasis upon the cross and crown. Hear the words of Leonard Bernstein: "For Bach all music is religious; writing it was

⁸ Ledbetter interprets the octave leaps and crossed voices as witty, free, and satirical (p. 332).

⁹ The reader will recall that Bach signed his name twice in the subject of the *bm* fugue, Book I. On its reverse side of the score he also wrote *SDG* (for *Soli Deo Gloria*).

an act of worship. Every note was dedicated to God and to nothing else.¹⁰

How affirming it is of Bach's own view that this insight should appear in a book called *The Joy of Music*. For Leipzig's Lutherans, joy was a consequence of faith, an offering of thanksgiving, the product of prayer and the peace that transcends all understanding. The pathway to joy led first to thinking on what is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.¹¹

The relationship between bm fugues is more than praiseworthy, but clear, consistent, and plainly purposed not to be overlooked. The pair is integrally wed: by subject, motive, and symbol. In treating these connections we shall dispel all notions of cuddling lovers and waves that swell on *Lippen und Brust*. At the same time we'll discover both fugues to be about a wedding--the joy of joining bride to groom. Consider...

The Subject

The image shows a window titled "Thematic Transformation" containing three musical staves. The top staff is labeled "Passion Fugue 2" and "bm Book 1", showing a bass clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The middle staff is labeled "Passion Fugue 3" and "f#m Book 2", also in bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature. The bottom staff is labeled "This fugue" and "bm Book 2", in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/8 time signature. Red dashed lines connect specific notes across the three staves, illustrating thematic transformations and relationships between the subjects of these fugues.

Subject of this fugue (bottom) compared with two of the three "passion fugues"

The 48 contain three *passion fugues* that develop themes of Christ's suffering and crucifixion.¹² Two resemble each other in content of their subjects. The present subject emanates from those two. For this

¹⁰ Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 264. I'm also reminded of Michael Marissen's observation that all Bach is sacred (Hal Hinkle distinguished lecture series, Oregon Bach Festival, July 5, 2006). Marissen argues that sacred vs. secular is, in Bach, a false dichotomy. The proper distinction is between liturgical and non-liturgical. Thus this fugue is non-liturgically sacred.

¹¹ See Philippians 4:4-8.

¹² The passion fugues are: No. 4 Book 1 in C-sharp minor, No. 24 Book 1 in B minor, and No. 14 Book 2 in F-sharp minor.

comparison I have selected statements in F-sharp minor. In view of these relationships the present fugue may be understood to emanate from the passion that precedes it. This subject is a thematic transformation of the others.¹³

The Motive

Each book of the 48 concludes with a fugue in quotation of a brief passage from the *St. Matthew Passion*. In this apodixis we come to understand Bach's motive--another reminder of Christ's passion and cross. Jesus has been betrayed and bound, soldiers now drag him to trial. Bach elaborates the word *gefangen* (captured or imprisoned) in canonic lines for two sopranos.¹⁴

The foregoing counterpoint is the very passage that Bach has referenced both in the bm prelude and fugue of Book I, and in the present work (not once, but twice)! The timeline identifies these as quotations of "Book I." They could just as well have been called *gefangen*, for there is no doubt that this counterpoint has "captured" Bach's heart and imagination. These are the motivic waves that flow, linking fugue-to-fugue, cycle-to-cycle, in profound contemplation of the salvific power of the cross.

The Symbol

The final connection is heard in the pathos of chromaticism. Two of the passion fugues contain descending chromatic lines, Bach's symbol for carrying the cross. These are followed by melodic inversions of the motive, i.e. the crown bestowed on those who carry that cross. In this fugue Bach has combined, for the first time, both ideas in simultaneity--stupendous counterpoint by any measure!

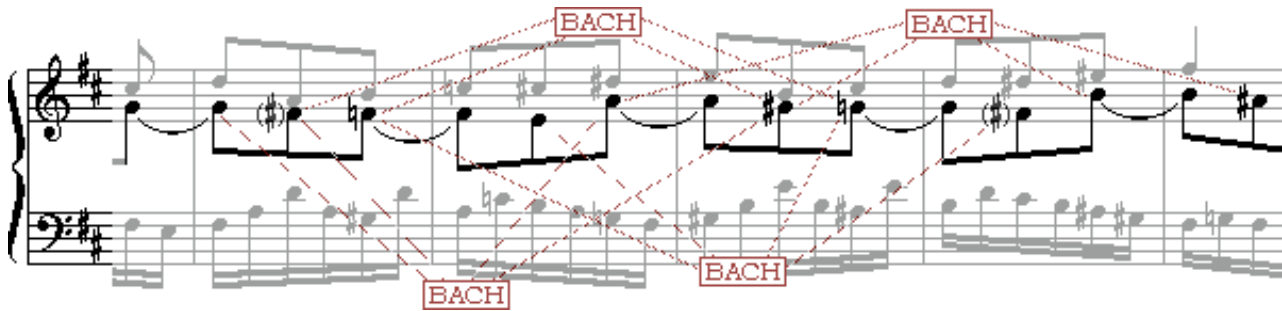
The symbol is heard in mm. 50-53 and mm. 92-95, both labeled χ .¹⁵ These passages feature chromatically ascending and descending melodies, the aural equivalent of "crossed" lines in the χ . These are the waving palms of victory that await those who faithfully carry Christ's cross.

The signal counterpoint of this fugue is its last 14 measures, which also close the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. This joyous music dances to the *gefangen* symbol followed immediately by Bach's triumphal χ . If the former is Jesus chained, the God of Good Friday, the latter is Jesus bursting from the bouldered tomb, the God of Easter.

¹³ Bach employed the same technique in the *Art of Fugue* and *Goldberg Variations*.

¹⁴ *St. Matthew Passion*, No. 27a, mm. 21-22.

¹⁵ *Chi* χ is the first letter in the Greek spelling of *Christ*, a symbol that Bach occasionally substituted for *cross*.



Bach's signature Cross/Crown passage, mm. 92-96.

Simultaneously descending and ascending chromatic lines represent *Chi* χ , Bach's symbol for the cross, into which he has woven transpositions of his name in tones

Equally valid, these 14 measures are Bach's own signature conclusion to the *Well-Tempered Clavier* ($B+A+C+H = 14$). Here Bach himself is captured, bound to the cross in the *gefangen* of counterpoint, but awaiting his crown and glorious resurrection. Now *that* is worth dancing a jig!

Re-creation of the Soul

Although related by subject, motive, and symbol, two fugues could have no more contrasting moods. Why the contrast? How is the bm of Book I complemented and fulfilled by its counterpart in Book II? To what purpose?

When asked of music's purpose, Bach himself replied: "to make a well-sounding harmony to the Glory of God and the permissible delectation of the spirit," often translated as *refreshment of the spirit*. "The aim and final reason of all music," (he continues) "is the Glory of God and the recreation of the mind"--or *recreation of the human soul*.

In Bach's language *recreation* did not mean, as it means to us, the pursuit of pleasurable habits and pastimes. To the devout Saxon recreation rang theological overtones in the transformative consolation and nourishment that comes from the *renewing of one's mind*.¹⁶ This was a spiritual quest, and music's power to *re-create* the soul and mind was, for Bach, an essential questing tool.

In consequence, the contrast between bm fugues must be interpreted in view of Bach's primary aim: to compose music that renews and re-creates the mind.¹⁷ To prove this point we'll need to revisit two of Bach's cantatas, both of which dance. In the first, Bach connects the *passepied* to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. In the second, he links the *passepied* to Christ's passion.

¹⁶ See Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹⁷ This quest began to emerge during Bach's employment in Mühlhausen and culminated in his decision to relinquish Cöthen's courtly perks and titles and return to the church. His letter of resignation from Mühlhausen envisions the composition of "well-appointed church music for the glory of God."

Cantata No. 49

The *sinfonia*, a passepied, foretells the cantata's theme--a wedding.¹⁸ This is followed by a dialogue between Jesus and the soul. In Biblical symbolism Jesus is the groom, and the soul the bride. In the last movement the groom declares his love while the bride responds in Philipp Nicolai's lovely chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*.

Jesus

I have loved you for ever and ever.

The Soul

How am I now so truly glad,
my treasure is the α and Ω ,
the beginning and end.

Here Bach mines not only the rich wedding imagery of the Apocalypse, but also of Jesus as history's beginning and end, the *Alpha* α and *Omega* Ω .¹⁹ The dialogue continues:

Jesus

And therefore I draw you to Me.

The Soul

He will claim me as his prize and take me to Paradise,
which I will clasp in my hands.

Jesus

I come soon,

The Soul

Amen! Amen!

In these hopeful words Bach has referenced the last verse of the New Testament. But there is a paradox. This sensuously joyful imagery pertains to the death of the believer. To die is not separation, but union with God--a marriage of sorts. The Wedding Supper of the Lamb is for Christ and those who have died. So the passepied dances in the hope of life beyond death, the ultimate re-creation of the soul.

¹⁸ BWV 49 was composed in 1726. The work is for the twentieth Sunday after Trinity. The Gospel is Matthew 22:1-14.

¹⁹ Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. See Revelation 22:12-13, 17.

Cantata No. 22

In 1723, during the final weeks of his tenure as *Hoffmusicus* in the retinue of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, Bach wrote a cantata in application for a church position in Leipzig.²⁰ This was performed at the St. Thomas Church on the last Sunday before Holy Week, a season that anticipates the suffering and death of Jesus.

In the Gospel for this Sunday, Luke 18:31-43, Jesus tells his disciples that he will go to Jerusalem where he will be mocked, insulted, spit upon, flogged, and crucified. But on the third day he will rise from the dead.

The sprightly *passépied* in response to this sobering news (4th movement) is only superficially related to resurrection. Bach's joy is prompted, rather, by prospect of a re-created mind and soul, a peaceful heart that has been restored to God.

My all in all, my eternal good,
improve my heart, change my outlook;
strike everything down which resists this denial of the flesh!
Yet when I am dead in spirit, then draw me to you in peace!

The irony cuts to the heart. Bach, whose professed musical aim is to *refresh the spirit* and *re-create the soul* has composed a dance of yearning to be *dead in spirit*? How can such ideas coexist? As before, reconciliation is found in *renewing the mind*, or in the words of the dance, improving one's heart and changing one's outlook. Only after this has been accomplished can the soul find peace.

Bear in mind that Bach wrote this cantata while contemplating resignation from his first, and only, appointment as court musician, the 18th-century roadmap to fortune and fame. The cantata was, in point of fact, his ticket to Leipzig and test of orthodoxy. Within weeks he would again be common *Cantor*, a church musician. This decision would require a significant cut in his salary, not to mention complete loss of income for Anna Magdalena, his young bride then employed in Prince Leopold's chapel choir.

It is helpful at this juncture to remember Sir John Eliot Gardiner's observation (2006 podcast) that Bach's use of the tenor voice represents "the beleaguered Christian, the soul that is tussling with doubt and unbelief." Turning that tussle to outright war, Bach concludes the cantata with Elisabeth Kreuziger's startling words from the chorale *Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn*:

²⁰ Bach was offered this position, which he retained to the end of his life, only after Telemann had turned it down and Graupner, Leipzig's second choice, could not obtain terms of release from his employer.

Kill us through your goodness,
wake us through your grace!
Sicken the old being so that the new may live
even here on this earth,
having his mind, all desires, and thoughts for you.

Kill us through your goodness? To the modern mind this is wacky. While contemporary speech permits the occasional "you slay me," or "I'll kill you," we understand these idioms to be in jest. But Kreuziger is "deadly" serious in her conviction; re-creation of the soul, the renewing of the mind, only follows awareness of one's failure to live up: "Sicken the old being" she writes "so that the new may live." How can one possibly be renewed in spirit if no renewal is needed, wanted, or deemed essential to spiritual growth?

In Lutheranism that awareness, that despair of impotence, one's inability to transcend egoism, hatred, selfishness, dishonesty, ambition, covetousness of what does not belong, was encouraged, even systematically cultivated, in contemplation of Christ's suffering and death. In abandoning self-interest for the sake of the soul, Jesus provided the model.²¹

The foregoing theme, arguably the most pervasive in Lutheranism, permeates the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Paradoxically he welcomes the erstwhile depressive thought with joy. Listen once more to the *passapied* of BWV 22, remembering the tenor's words: "strike everything down which resists this denial of the flesh! Yet when I am dead in spirit, then draw me to you in peace!"

If mortification of the flesh is Lutheranism's subject, then contemplation of one's own mortality is its enigmatic counterpoint. Here, too, we tussle, especially in this wretched age when zealots strap bombs to themselves to satiate the pathological promptings of "god." How could Bach's impulse for paradise be lovely in view of the suicide bomber's similar desire? Such words can be understood only in the milieu of their writing. What was the context?

Listen once more to the final movement of BWV 49, noting well Bach's setting of the couplet "He will claim me as his prize and take me to Paradise, which I will clasp in my hands." These words were written by a Lutheran pastor who, 100 years before Bach set them to the dance, lost 1,300 members of his congregation to the plague, 170 in one horrific week. Pastor Nicolai responded with *Freudenspiegel*, "The Mirror of Joy," a tract of consolation, to which he appended the words and melody Bach offers to us now. "How brightly shines the morning star," Nicolai called his

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer's tormented decision to join the plot to kill Hitler represents another of that model's countless promptings. A pacifist, and Lutheran pastor, Bonhoeffer believed that in murder, a mortal sin, he would lose his own soul. But to save others he came to the point of willingness to pay that price. The plot being unsuccessful, Bonhoeffer went to his death in Flossenbürg with calmness, we're told, even joy.

hymn, now sung by a soprano, Bach's virginal human soul, bride of Christ, and his beloved Church.

In this haunting poetry Nicolai consoles his congregation; death is the "mirror of joy" he implies, for in it your loved ones have joined God's wedding feast. Make ready now your soul, for any second may be yours to join. Keep your lamp trimmed and full of oil. "Fix your eyes on Jesus *who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*"²²

The bm fugue of Book I is the α of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*; its counterpart of Book II is the Ω . One is the cross, the other the crown-- Bach's dance of the re-created mind, promised to all who endure the long dark night of the soul.²³

²² See Hebrews 12:2. Although Bach's Bible contains no annotation in association with this verse, the phrase "who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross" encapsulates the theological connection between the bm fugues of Books I and II.

²³ The *Dark Night of the Soul*, the most important work of the 16th century Spanish monk St. John of the Cross is another mystical allusion to the wedding of Christ and the Christian soul.