

The Well-Tempered Clavier (Book I)

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As one of the pillars of Western art music, Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, in a sense, needs no introduction. The first book, completed in 1722, is an exploration of Bach's new tuning system that allowed for pieces to be composed in any key, as opposed to earlier tuning systems that favored certain keys, while forcing others to be horribly out of tune. While Bach's "Well-Temperament" was not identical to Equal Temperament as we know it today, it was related to it in its quest for tonal universality (and practicality).

Though today it's not-at-all uncommon for this piece to function as a concert work, originally, it was rather more of a textbook for key facility. In fact, in Bach's own title page, he refers to this monumental set of Preludes and Fugues as being "*Zum Nutzen und Gebrauch der Lehr-begierigen Musicalischen Jugend, als auch derer in diesem studio schon habil seyenden besonderem ZeitVertreib*" ("for the profit and use of learn-lusty musical youth and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study"). In this statement, we can see Bach as the great pedagogue, offering these pieces to musicians to indulge their lust for musical learning. The sheer quality and imagination present throughout are a testament to a pedagogy of inspiration, in which the student's diligence is fueled by a desire to do the music justice, and not a slavish rendering of mere exercises.

While generations of keyboard players have been able to take part in this great project of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, other instrumentalists have been rather shut-out. Tired of simply studying the score and listening to recordings, I endeavored to transcribe this work for a small ensemble of guitars. While this may, at first, seem like a rather unusual instrumentation, it has several favorable characteristics. First, the guitar has a clarity to its plucked string sound not unlike a harpsichord, however, unlike a harpsichord, it can shape the musical lines with infinite shades of dynamic and timbral contrast (much like a modern piano). While the acoustic characteristics of the guitar do seem to take the best of both worlds from the harpsichord and the piano, there is an even deeper quality to performing this work with a guitar quartet:

The contrapuntal nature of a fugue is historically derived from vocal polyphony, in which a group of individuals would sing separate melodic lines that combine to generate harmonious sonorities. While the lines were bound by strict rules of "vertical" relationships between voices, equally important was the independence of the "horizontal" melodic line. When these polyphonic works began to be executed on a solo instrument such as a keyboard or lute, the individuality of the lines could be gathered into the consciousness of a single player, managing the voices rather like a monarch, an impressive intellectual feat, but lacking the sense of true interdependence that exists in a group of performers.

So, while the original intent of this work may have been for an individual to play these pieces at the keyboard, the process of teasing out the individual threads of the texture and giving single melodic lines to each player is, in a sense, reinstating the interconnected, democratic quality of this polyphonic music. As a group, we are all reliant on each others' choice of tempo, dynamic, and articulation, and are free to create musical dialogues collaboratively and spontaneously without the control of a single "interpreter".

One byproduct of this approach is that the contrapuntal diversity of The Well-Tempered Clavier is made clearly manifest. That is to say, from one movement to the next, the number of "voices" changes (2 voices, 3 voices, 4 voices), thus changing the number of guitars needed for that movement. When played on a keyboard, the number of voices contained in the texture is often not readily apparent except to highly trained musicians. In this arrangement, however, a four-voice fugue will clearly begin with a single individual playing, followed by a second entering soon after, then the third, and finally the fourth, giving a visual analogue to the compositional structure of the piece. Similarly, a three-voice fugue will use only three guitars, leaving one member out to simply listen. The only exceptions to this principle are the two 5-voice fugues (#4 in C-sharp Minor, and #22 in B-flat Minor). In these cases, all four guitars play, and the fifth voice is passed around the group requiring an individual guitar to do "double-duty" with two-part counterpoint from time to time.

Our seating position allows for this flexibility in instrumentation. From left to right, the performers are: Adam Pettit, Albert Diaz, Jack Cimo, and Michael Kudirka. These positions correspond to the players' role in the quartet: Bass, Tenor, Alto, and Soprano respectively. The minimum number of voices required is 2, and will be played as Bass/Soprano duets between the two externally-seated players: Adam Pettit (playing the Bass voice on a 7-string guitar), and Michael Kudirka (playing the Soprano part on an adapted "soprano guitar"). Three-voice pieces will then go on to include an Alto voice played by either Albert Diaz or Jack Cimo (seated in the middle). Finally, the four and five part pieces will be played by the whole quartet. The end result will be an ever-changing expansion and contraction of the ensemble's forces precisely mirroring the changing density of Bach's original work.

- Michael Kudirka