

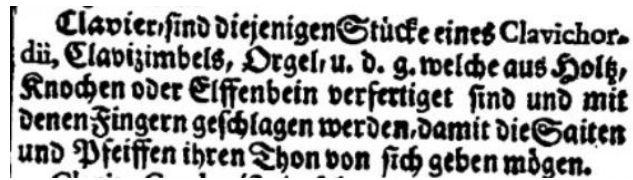
DAVID YEARSLEY: THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER AT 300 (301?)

Accessibility of knowledge was crucial to the Enlightenment. That ethos was embodied in the celebrated *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert, the first of its seventeen volumes appearing in 1751, the year after Johann Sebastian Bach's death. Yet that great French undertaking was dwarfed by its German predecessor: Johann Zedler's *Großes vollständiges Universal Lexicon* (Grand and Complete Lexicon), which ran to nearly 70 volumes published in Leipzig between 1731 and 1754. The project spanned two decades of Johann Sebastian Bach's tenure as Director of Music in that city.



Title page of the first volume of Johann Heinrich Zedler's *Großes vollständiges Universal Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1731)

Bach's name does not appear in Zedler's *Lexicon*, but the word *Clavier* (keyboard) does, defined in a modest entry of five lines in volume six from 1733 as, "the part of an organ, harpsichord, or clavichord made from wood, bone, or ivory and played with the fingers so that the strings or pipes bring forth their tones."



Clavier sind diejenigen Stücke eines Clavichordi, Clavizimbels, Orgel, u. d. g. welche aus Holz, Knochen oder Elfenbein verfertigt sind und mit denen Fingern geschlagen werden, damit die Saiten und Pfeiffen ihren Ton von sich geben mögen.

Definition of "Clavier": (vol. 5, col. 266 [p. 252])

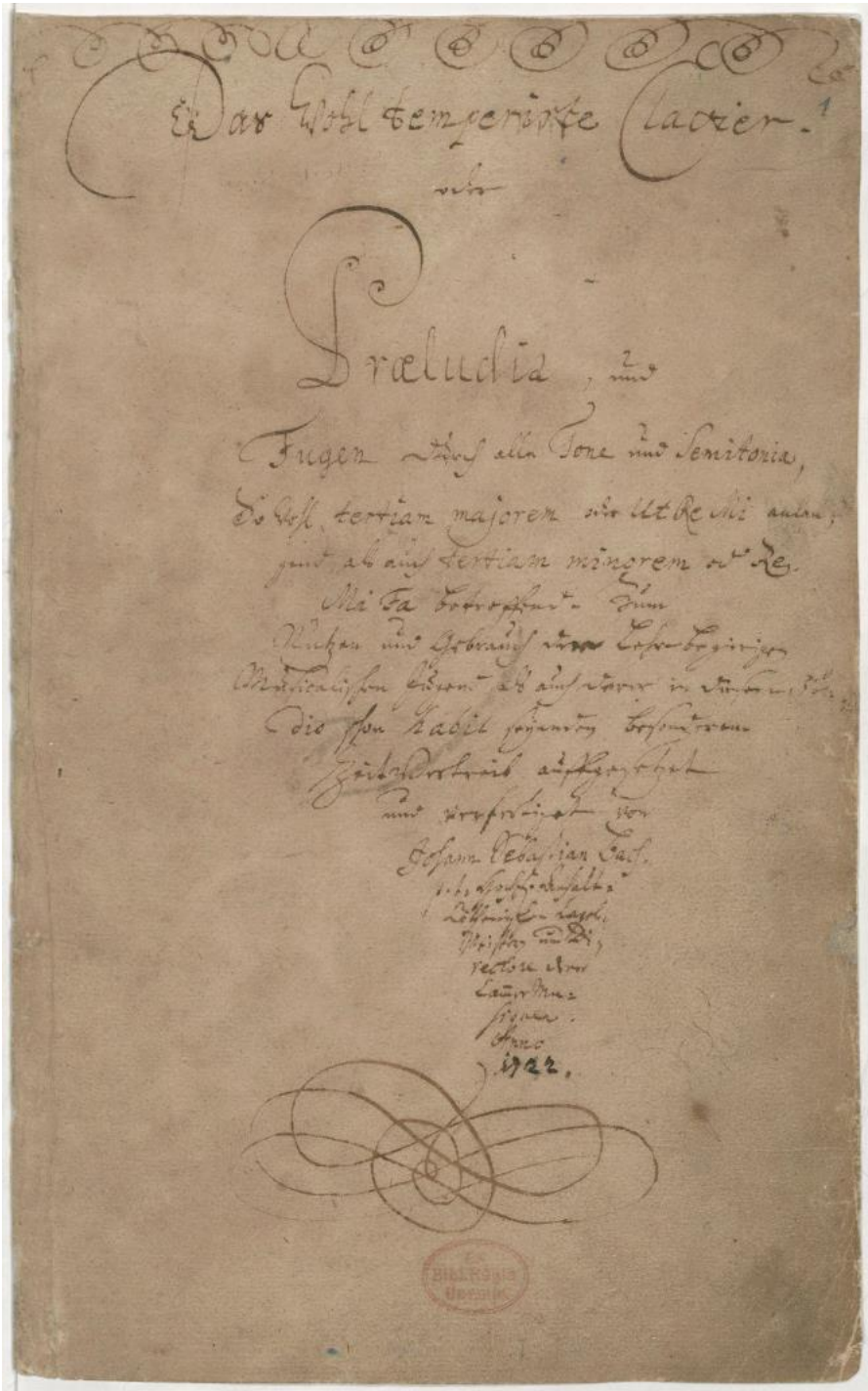
Encyclopedists and wikipedists increasingly dominate our days and nights as one of the prime ways to know the world. At smartphone or computer keyboard our fingers feed our brains, although the more skeptical might claim that this "digital revolution" enfeebles our faculties. Bach's admirers and students praised what they saw as his revolutionary inclusion of the thumb as an equal partner at the keyboard: his first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, wrote that "in Bach's method the thumb was made a principal finger, because it is absolutely impossible to do without it in what are the difficult keys." How fascinated—or, more likely, perplexed—Bach would have been by the silent symphony of thumbs playing around the globe at tiny flat keyboards made not of bone or wood but of Gorilla glass.

Pizza-boxed sized containers of knowledge to be hefted from their shelves and leafed through with all the fingers, the individual volumes of Zedler's *Lexicon* were a lot bigger and heavier than iPhones or laptops. These books were lavish and expensive, the print run around 1,500 copies. But the *Lexicon* was available in the Leipzig library and accessible to students. Only the city's wealthy patricians had the money—and space—to have these weighty folio volumes adorn the bookshelves of their mansions.

While on occasion Bach made music in some of these stately homes, it was almost entirely out of public view that he had set about creating his own keyboard encyclopedia, one that ranged across many volumes and myriad styles far-flung geographically and historically.

The composer was certainly aware of the lasting importance and practical value of his sustained research project in the art of keyboard elaboration and performance. Yet only a fraction of it appeared in print, the main contribution being the four parts of his *Clavierübung* (Keyboard Practice) were published in his lifetime.

One of the most ambitious components of Bach's undertaking was a survey of preludes and fugues in all the major and minor keys, its titlepage penned three hundred and one years ago in 1722.



Title page of Bach's autograph of the Well-Tempered Clavier I, 1722. Berlin State Library, Shelfmark: Mus. Ms. Bach P 415

This first collection was followed in the early 1740s by a second, longer volume also of twenty-four preludes and fugues.

The most recent precedent for Bach's collection had been published just three years before, in 1719. The Hamburg musician, theorist, prolific man of letters Johann Mattheson had, in his treatise the Exemplary Organist's Trial (*Exemplarische Organisten-Probe*) assembled two sets of bass lines in all keys that were then to be harmonized by the keyboardist in a range of styles.

With his own towering compendium of 1722, Bach clearly wanted to supersede his haughty contemporary's more modest, and certainly more pedantic, efforts. In his publication, Mattheson had proceeded from the safe, euphonious keys associated with the ancient church modes and then moved progressively outward to the most remote and challenging ones. His first set concludes in C-sharp Major, the second set in that key's enharmonic equivalent of D-flat. In 1711 Bach's friend, the Royal Polish and Saxon Director of Music, Johann David Heinichen, had published a keyboard fantasy that proceeded almost circumspectly through all keys, the piece making its way through tonal areas a fifth apart.

Bach by contrast ascends systematically, one might even say ruthlessly, through the chromatic scale. After the familiar and welcoming keys of C Major and C Minor, he confronts the hard realities of C-sharp major with—depending on the tuning chosen—its much more active, even antic home triad. Bach faces up to the aural and digital challenges of accommodating all keys—of well-tempering the keyboard and developing the requisite fingering—right near the start of the journey.

In launching his encyclopedic volume of preludes and fugues, the compose-performer-teacher Bach had not only tackled the problem of playing in all keys but had also put great demands on his own powers of invention: the preludes present an authoritative, yet gracious catalog of figuration and mood, technique and expressive possibility; new approaches are discovered and explored, while familiar modes are illuminated by Bach's unique insights and continually enlivened by unexpected turns.

These freely conceived pieces introduce fugues of encompassing scope, from the buoyant and untroubled to the introspective, stern, and searchingly complex where themes devised by Bach can afford the combinatorial techniques of erudite counterpoint: stretto (the overlapping of the subject with itself), melodic inversion, temporal augmentation or diminution (these doublings, halvings, and quarterings of the pace could even occur simultaneously).

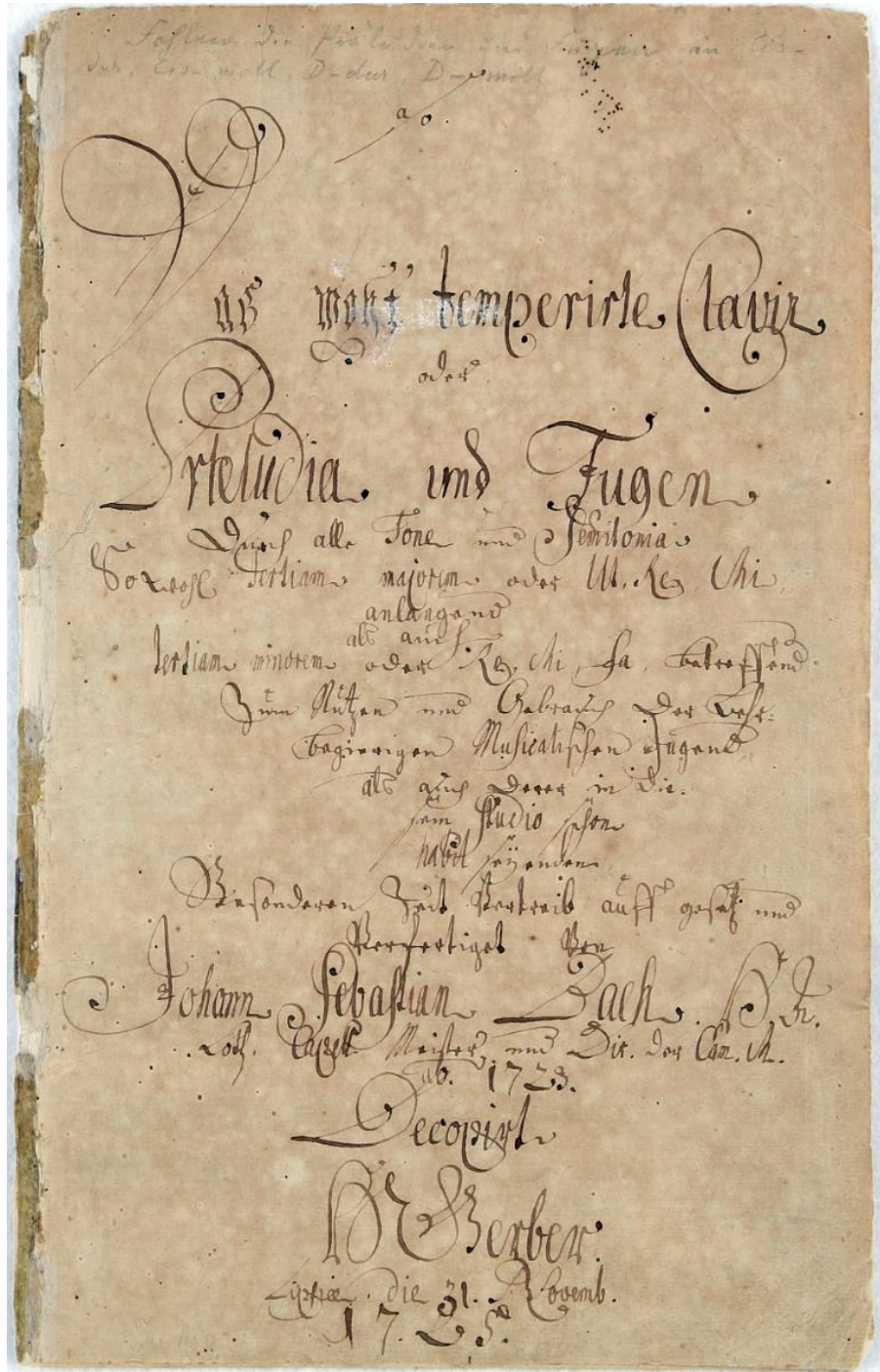
Bach drew on some preexisting pieces in compiling his *Well-Tempered Clavier*, on occasion transposing a composition into a new key in order to fill out the roster of tonalities. Yet Bach's commanding sense of control imbues the collection's kaleidoscopic diversity with palpable cohesion, the grand scheme brought to a close with magisterial melancholy in the final fugue in B Minor whose sighing theme includes all twelve tones of the chromatic scale traversed in the preceding pieces.

It might strike us as odd, even eccentric that this keyboard compendium exploring the musical arts with such single-minded purpose should not have been published during Bach's lifetime. This was an encyclopedia of preludes and fugues pursued in the shadows of Enlightenment. This becomes especially apparent when we bask in the ubiquitous accessibility of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* three hundred years later: the dozens of modern editions; the plethora of eighteenth-century sources, including the manuscript in Bach's own hand, available through Bach Digital and many other on-line resources available at our fingertips.

By contrast to this open-access approach, Bach kept close guard on these compositions so central to his pedagogical program. Philipp David Kräuter, who studied with Bach in Weimar some years before the compilation of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, reported back to his sponsors in the City of Augsburg 250 miles to the south, that his teacher had asked a fee of 100 thaler per year. Kräuter got him down to 80: "for this he will give me board and instruction. He is an excellent, and also conscientious, man both for composition and clavier, and also for other instruments. He gives me at least 6 hours of instruction a day, which I badly need particularly for composition and clavier, but also for other instruments. The remaining time I spend doing my own practice and copying, since he lets me have all the music I want." A decade later the *Well-Tempered Clavier* would be among the manuscript volumes made available to those ready for its challenges; copying it out by hand in Bach's house from the original represented a milestone for his students.

One of those later pupils was Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, who came to study with Bach in 1724. The first question Bach asked his new charge was whether he played fugues. Within a year the young man began copying out the first six preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, a beautiful manuscript now held at the Riemenschneider Bach Institute at Baldwin-Wallace College in Ohio. By the time Gerber left Bach's supervision he had the entire volume among his effects.

Gerber also meticulously copied out the title page, even providing the date he finished the task—November 1st of 1725, but dating Bach’s completion in 1723 — which would make this year the 300th anniversary, in which case Matthew’s recording appears exactly at the right time!



Title page of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier I in the copy made by his student Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, November 1[?], 1725.
Riemenschneider Bach Institute, Baldwin Wallace University

Just as in the original, Gerber's title page reads:

"The Well-Tempered Clavier or Preludes and Fugues through all the tones and semitones, both the major 3rd, or Ut Re Mi, and with the minor 3rd, or Re Mi Fa. For the use and improvement of musical youth eager to learn, and for the particular amusement of those already skilled in this discipline / notated and fashioned by Johann Sebastian Bach while Capellmeister to the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen, and Director of his Chamber Music."

These words make clear that this was advanced material, not the easy fare served up to amateurs targeted by the those serving the burgeoning market in printed keyboard music.

Gerber also says that Bach himself played through the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier* for him no fewer than three times, though it is unclear whether any or all of these performances were at a single sitting. Whatever the case, those presentations in Bach's home set a legendary precedent for subsequent performances of the collection in its entirety like that now available with Matthew's recording of the first book.

Gerber's son, writing some seventy years after his father's time with the master, tells us that "according to a certain tradition, [Bach] wrote his *Tempered Clavier* (consisting of fugues and preludes, some of them very intricate, in all 24 keys) in a place where ennui, boredom and the absence of any kind of musical instrument forced him to resort to this pastime."

This presents an alluring vision of a Bach temporarily without access to his own musical library and keyboard instruments having to rely only on his own stores of experience and knowledge to produce this work of limitless imagination and erudition.

Various possibilities have been proposed for the place of isolation that spawned this epoch-making collection. One attractive, if perhaps fanciful locale is the prison at the Court of Weimar into which Bach had been thrown by his employer Duke Wilhelm Ernst, displeased at Bach's departure for the nearby court of Cöthen where he would hold the prestigious title of Kapellmeister, one that the *Well-Tempered Clavier* title page proudly brandishes. It is a mythic scenario of Enlightenment: the incarcerated Artist's Reason illuminates the dark dungeon. Liberty of thought cannot be taken from him, and his personal victory over confinement results in an epoch-making advance for the arts and for the lives of his fellow human beings down the centuries. The world had changed before the first note had been sounded on clavichord, organ, and harpsichord.



Prelude in C Major (BWV 846/1) in Bach's hand and Gerber's hand respectively

Preludium I.

Forte Subito

Prelude in C Major (BWV 846/1) in Bach's hand and Gerber's hand respectively