

# *THE WELL- TEMPERED CLAVIER at Rienzi*



Digital Program  
Booklet

**SATURDAY | OCTOBER 16, 2021 | 6 & 7:30 PM**

**SATURDAY | JUNE 4, 2022 | 6 PM**

Rienzi | MFAH

Matthew Dirst  
*Artistic Director*

ARS  
LYRICA  
HOUSTON 

# PROGRAM

---

*The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1 (1722)*

by

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Matthew Dirst, harpsichord

Single-manual harpsichord

by John Phillips (Berkeley, 2021)

after the work of the Gräbner family (Dresden, c1720)

Rienzi

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

## **PROGRAM 1**

**Videotaped on May 3, 2021**

Prelude and Fugue in C Major, BWV 846  
Prelude and Fugue in A Minor, BWV 865  
Prelude and Fugue in F Major, BWV 856  
Prelude and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 851  
Prelude and Fugue in B-flat Major, BWV 866  
Prelude and Fugue in G Minor, BWV 861  
Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major, BWV 852  
Prelude and Fugue in C Minor, BWV 847

## **PROGRAM 2**

**In-person performance on Saturday, October 16, 2021  
at 6 and 7:30 pm**

Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp Major, BWV 848  
Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp Minor, BWV 849  
Prelude and Fugue in E Minor, BWV 855  
Prelude and Fugue in A Major, BWV 864  
Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp Minor, BWV 859  
Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp Major, BWV 858  
Prelude and Fugue in G Major, BWV 860  
Prelude and Fugue in F Minor, BWV 857

## **PROGRAM 3**

**In-person performance on Saturday, June 4, 2022 at 6 pm**

Prelude and Fugue in A-flat Major, BWV 862  
Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Minor, BWV 853  
Prelude and Fugue in D Major, BWV 850  
Prelude and Fugue in B Minor, BWV 869  
Prelude and Fugue in B Major, BWV 868  
Prelude and Fugue in G-sharp Minor, BWV 863  
Prelude and Fugue in E Major, BWV 854  
Prelude and Fugue in B-flat Minor, BWV 867

## PROGRAM NOTES

---

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* (*WTC*) is the only work of Johann Sebastian Bach that never went out of style. Unlike his church and chamber works, which were mostly forgotten soon after his death in 1750, the *WTC* served as a kind of musical Old Testament for generations of students and enthusiasts—a role it still plays today. Comprising two sets of twenty-four preludes and fugues each in all the major and minor keys, the work was dedicated by the composer in 1722 “for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study.” This series of performances celebrates the collection’s 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

This initial volume (Book 1) proved so useful that Bach assembled a comparable cycle (Book 2) in the early 1740s, both of which continue to serve complementary purposes: as compositional and keyboard pedagogy of the highest order and as recreational music to be enjoyed on one’s own, or perhaps in the company of like-minded friends. These essentially domestic modes of reception are reflected in the original sources of this music. In contrast to the four parts of his *Clavier-Übung* (Keyboard Exercise) series, which Bach had published in expensive copper-plate engravings, both volumes of his *WTC* circulated for years in manuscript form—that is, hand copies of entire books or portions thereof.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when little of Sebastian Bach’s output was available in print and knowledge of it largely restricted to the musically well-connected, the *WTC* nourished an ever-widening stream of reception, one that gradually acquired multiple branches. Central European and English keyboard players were the primary beneficiaries, thanks to circles of Bach enthusiasts in the major cities. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart first encountered the *WTC* at the home of Viennese collector Baron Gottfried van Swieten, who acquired a significant amount of music while in diplomatic service in Berlin. The Saxon composer Christian Gottlob Neefe had his precocious pupil

Ludwig van Beethoven learn both books of the *WTC* at the tender age of eleven. A few decades later, as part of an insurgent Bach “campaign” in England, organist Samuel Wesley entertained capacity crowds with *WTC* fugues.

Writers on music from this time likewise embraced the cause, making repeated calls for the publication of both volumes. This finally came to pass with the virtually simultaneous release in 1800–01 of three continental editions of the *WTC* from publishers in Bonn, Zurich, and Vienna. English reprints and eventually French and other editions followed, as public interest in Bach’s music grew across Europe. Since then, this staple of the keyboard repertoire has never been out of print.

Bach’s artfully imprecise title allows for considerable interpretive leeway. “Well-Tempered” refers here not to the emotional disposition of the composer or his music but rather to a particular kind of tuning system. Unlike modern string instruments, whose strings are tuned in perfect fifths, keyboard instruments require a bit of acoustic “cheating.” Long ago the octave was divided into twelve half-steps, which became identical in size only recently: by splitting the difference, equal temperament renders all intervals of the same size equally out of tune. During the seventeenth century, keyboards were commonly tuned in a “meantone” system, in which perfectly in-tune major thirds are divided into two equal whole steps but with unequal half-steps (its “leading tones” are quite low). Meantone tuning inevitably favors familiar keys at the expense of others: C major is beautifully restful, but C-sharp major cannot be sounded, since its essential thirds are wildly out of tune. The decades around 1700 saw the first “well-tempered” tuning systems, which allow more harmonic movement while retaining a hierarchy from the best- to the worst-sounding keys. While the precise makeup of Bach’s well-tempered system is still the subject of some debate, his chromatic palate suggests a well-tempered system in which all keys are usable. These performances employ precisely that kind of system, so that each key has distinct characteristics.

With this term prominently displayed on his “fair copy” (a revised and corrected manuscript) of Book 1, Bach emphasized both the necessary tuning system and his music’s extraordinary tonal reach. Though he was neither the first nor the only composer to write a cycle that traverses all the modes or keys (the relevant examples for Bach extend from a 1584 corpus of dance music to a 1719 volume of figured bass exercises), the *WTC* trumps the rest in sheer ambition. It has, in turn, inspired many composers to respond in kind: Chopin’s *24 Preludes*, for example, or Shostakovich’s *24 Preludes and Fugues*. As was his custom, Bach tinkered constantly with the parameters and materials at hand and

assembled both books gradually, with at least a few preludes and fugues transposed from their original keys to fill gaps in the overall tonal scheme.

The generic German term “Clavier” (or “Klavier”) refers to any kind of keyboard instrument, which for most of Bach’s lifetime meant either the harpsichord or clavichord and sometimes the organ. Bach encountered the fortepiano for the first time in the 1740s, and given his enthusiasm for this new instrument, we might include it as a possibility as well, especially for the *galant*-style pieces in Book 2. The modern piano, finally, allows for a greater variety of tone color, and perhaps most important, it projects this intimate music into large concert spaces.

But perhaps a single instrument is too confining for such a mind-bending and diverse collection. Some of the *WTC* preludes and fugues seem more suited to the gentle purr of the clavichord, others to the plucky timbre of the harpsichord. Organists and chamber musicians have adapted many of the *stile antico* (Renaissance-style) fugues to their own instruments, on which the sustained tones of such fugues sing out beautifully. Transcriptions of individual preludes and fugues are legion; some even include sung texts. One wonders whether a good Lutheran like Bach would approve of the first prelude from Book 1 in its familiar “Ave Maria” guise—which itself glosses a syrupy instrumental melody that Charles Gounod first superimposed on Bach’s spare arpeggios.

Unlike Bach’s organ preludes and fugues, which tend toward the public and showy, the Book 1 preludes and fugues explore a variety of private moods, from the cheerful to the mournful, and are endlessly (even subversively) inventive. The C-major Prelude’s steady rhythmic motion recalls the way lutenists researched sonorities on their plucked instruments via strummed chords, while its long-range harmonic progression quietly transforms the humble genre of the arpeggiated prelude. The C-major Fugue, premised on the simplest of rising motives, is nevertheless a *tour-de-force* of imitative counterpoint, with multiple close subject entries (*stretto*) plus a grand concluding pedal point. By contrast, the D-major Fugue is all artifice; its grandiose and vaguely French subject produces little sophisticated counterpoint but plenty of sonorous music.

Occasionally even Bach struggled with remote tonalities: the Prelude in E-flat Minor is followed by a Fugue in D-sharp Minor, its enharmonic equivalent, presumably for more straightforward notation of both (fewer double-sharps or double-flats). For this dark key Bach fashioned an intense aria-style prelude and a solemn fugue with abundant chromaticism.

His testing of generic and procedural boundaries is even more evident in the Prelude in E-flat Major, which is really a double fugue (a fugue with a consistent subject and countersubject). Leisurely figuration from the beginning returns in the middle of this chameleon prelude, now cleverly repackaged as a countersubject to the rather staid fugue subject that dominates the movement. The E-flat Fugue, by contrast, is a cheeky romp on a subject that invites motivic play and, near the end, some surprising chromatic turns.

Allusions to familiar stylistic tropes also abound in Book 1, from the gentle pastorale of the E-major Prelude to the gigue-like G-major Fugue. Several of the preludes resemble Bach's two-part inventions in their reliance on just two fully invertible parts (C-sharp major, F major, G major), while the A-major Prelude is a three-part invention, with invertible counterpoint in all voices. Its corresponding fugue is a gently teasing affair: listen especially for the provocative rest after its subject's initial note.

Other preludes resemble restless cantata movements (E minor), virtuosic toccatas (B-flat major), and cheerful dances (A-flat major). The fugues, too, embrace a wide range of emotional characters and technical procedures, from the jaunty and tight (F-sharp major) to the languid and endlessly searching (B minor). Fugal voicing is impressively varied, from two (E minor) to five (C-sharp minor and B-flat minor) with the majority sporting either three or four independent parts.

© MATTHEW DIRST

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

---



**Matthew Dirst**, recently described in the *Washington Post* as an “efficient, extremely precise conductor who has an ear for detail,” is the first American musician to win major international prizes in both organ and harpsichord, including the American Guild of Organists National Young Artist Competition and the Warsaw International Harpsichord Competition. Widely admired for his stylish playing and conducting, Dirst leads Ars Lyrica Houston, a period-instrument ensemble with several acclaimed recordings, one of which—J. A. Hasse’s *Marc Antonio e Cleopatra*—was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2011 for Best Opera. His degrees include a PhD in musicology from Stanford University and the *prix de virtuosité* in both organ and harpsichord from the Conservatoire National de Reuil-Malmaison, France, where he spent two years as a Fulbright scholar. Equally active as a scholar and as an organist, Dirst is Professor of Music at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston, and Organist at St. Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston. His publications include *Engaging Bach: The Keyboard Legacy from Marburg to Mendelssohn* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), *Bach and the Organ* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), and *Learned Play: Bach’s Art of Fugue and Musical Offering* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2022).



# ARS LYRICA HOUSTON

---

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Ed Hess, *President*

Sonja Bruzauskas, *Vice-President*

Richard Viebig, *Treasurer*

Brendan Godfrey, *Secretary*

John Lemen, *Immediate*

*Past President*

Alan Austin

Elizabeth Bellows Brockman

Ed Grusnis

Schubert Huang

Connie Kwan-Wong

Wil McCorquodale

Shane A. Miller

Ed Rinehart

Eleanor Viebig

## ADVISORY BOARD

Shelby Allen

Gabriel Loperena

## STAFF

Matthew Dirst, *Artistic Director*

Kinga Ferguson, *Executive Director*

Kathleen Staten, *Publicist & Education Consultant*

Emma Wine, *Operations & Outreach Manager*

## ABOUT ARS LYRICA

Founded in 1998 by harpsichordist and conductor Matthew Dirst, Ars Lyrica Houston presents a diverse array of music in its original context while creating connections to contemporary life. Ars Lyrica's acclaimed programming features neglected gems alongside familiar masterworks, and extracts the dramatic potential, emotional resonance, and expressive power of music. Its local subscription series, according to the Houston Chronicle, "sets the agenda" for early music in Houston. Ars Lyrica appears regularly at international festivals and concert series because of its distinctive focus, and its pioneering efforts in the field of authentic performance have won international acclaim, including a Grammy nomination for Best Opera.

---

## ARS LYRICA HOUSTON IN-KIND SPONSORS

---

Moore School of Music, University of Houston

St Philip Presbyterian Church

Viebig, McCommon & Associates, P.C.

# Support and Major Funding Provided By

Albert and Ethel Herzstein  
Charitable Foundation

The Antiquarium

Brown Foundation

Cullen Trust for the Performing Arts

Dian Graves Owen Foundation

George and Mary Josephine

Hamman Foundation

Houston Endowment

Houston Saengerbund

Moore School of Music,

University of Houston

St. Philip Presbyterian Church

Viebig, McCommon & Associates, P.C



FUNDED IN PART BY  
**THE CITY OF HOUSTON**  
THROUGH  
**HOUSTON ARTS ALLIANCE**



Texas  
Commission  
on the Arts



**ART WORKS.**

**National  
Endowment  
for the Arts**  
arts.gov



*Ars Lyrica performs at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, sponsored by Houston Area Lexus Dealers and United Airlines*



*CKW Luxe is Outreach Underwriter and Media Sponsor for Ars Lyrica Houston*

CARING KINDNESS WISDOM  
**CKW LUXE**

PHILANTHROPIC, INSPIRATIONAL, AND QUALITY LIVING MAGAZINE

SPRING/SUMMER 2022

Travel with the Publisher to

**UNCOVER THE  
MANY MOODS  
of Morocco**

**The Lifelong  
Benefits of  
Having Good  
Friends**

**2022  
TOP 20  
IMPACT MAKERS  
AWARDS**

*The Powerful Pull of  
Gratitude*

CKW LUXE is a philanthropic, inspirational, and quality living magazine. Our initials stand for **Caring, Kindness, and Wisdom**. We aim to inspire, educate, and inform our readers with inspirational articles as well as promote charities that improve our world.

[WWW.CKWLUXE.COM](http://WWW.CKWLUXE.COM)