

The **C Major Prelude** is one of several arpeggiated preludes in Book 1. Its extraordinary popularity may owe something to the mechanical nature of its broken chords; Bach injected greater surface variety into other preludes of this type. With no melodic line, such textures rely solely on Bach's ability to create long-term harmonic progressions that sustain our interest. The **C Major Fugue** likewise begins with basic material: an ascending scale, whose fourth note is followed by a striking rhythmic snap and a few skips in both directions. This simple fugue subject works beautifully in close imitation against itself, in a procedure called stretto. While such layering is often difficult to discern, Bach has made it relatively easy to hear in this fugue.

The **C Minor Prelude** is the most agitated of the broken-chord style preludes in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. With quick mirrored figuration in both hands, this prelude resembles later piano etudes by Johannes Brahms and Charles-Louis Hanon. Such pieces share a common goal: independence of the fingers. The harmonic progression of Bach's motoric Prelude gains steam gradually, leading to a highly-charged bit of keyboard recitative just before the end. The lithe subject of the **C Minor Fugue** finds its contrapuntal partners quickly, in two countersubjects that accompany its every entrance. Once he has rotated through every vertical combination of those three bits of melody, Bach brings this fugue to a close with one final statement of the subject in the soprano voice, leaving it lingering in our ears.

Bach revised his **C-Sharp Major Prelude** multiple times, turning a modest arpeggiated prelude into a brilliant if brief concert piece. Its simple musical material, like that of his other preludes based on broken chords, cycles through some seldom-encountered key areas, thanks to a signature in which every note of the scale is marked sharp. The companion Fugue is a more sophisticated contrapuntal dance, with a jaunty theme that bounces between three very active voices.

In comparison, the **C-Sharp Minor Prelude** projects grandeur and a seriousness of purpose. With a deliberate sense of pacing and expressive figuration, Bach gently pulls us through an extraordinary harmonic prolongation in the Prelude. The **C-Sharp Minor Fugue**, one of his most ambitious, features five independent voices and three successive melodic ideas. You'll hear first a sober and somewhat old-fashioned fugue subject in long notes, which is eventually combined with two counter melodies, one smooth and flowing and the other identifiable by a knocking, repeated-note figure.

Like many preludes in this volume, the **D Major Prelude** explores a single compositional idea that correlates well with a particular hand position. Here the right

hand does the heavy lifting, with perpetually moving figuration based on a brief pattern of just four notes. The left hand functions as a kind of ticking clock for the more discursive right until they join forces for a bit of harmonic drama at the end. The **D Major Fugue**, one of Bach's most straightforward in its use of thematic material, is clothed in the rhythmic style of the French overture, with characteristic swooping upbeats and majestic dotted figures.

The **D Minor Prelude** features an irregular succession of broken chords in the right hand against a more static left hand, producing the most searching of the arpeggiated preludes in Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Just before the end, the bass drops away for a brief cadenza in the right hand, which gets resolved with powerful concluding chords. For the companion **D Minor Fugue** Bach crafted a subject that begins as a simple scale but quickly turns back on itself. Its two halves, though presented sequentially at the outset, can also be combined vertically. Bach takes advantage of the latter possibility right away, in a densely imitative fugue that also includes inverted subject entries, where the melody is turned upside down.

Several preludes in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* seem to have begun as improvisations on standard harmonic sequences. Not so with the **Prelude in E-Flat Major** from Book 1. Despite its leisurely opening, this is the most ambitious prelude in the entire volume. It features two distinct motives, the first scalar and searching and the second a more concise upward stride followed by a slow descent. Bach gives each of these ideas a short independent exposition, then combines them in a *tour-de-force* of uncommon contrapuntal and harmonic richness. In comparison, the **E-Flat Major Fugue** seems almost an afterthought, with its lighthearted subject and gently burbling texture.

The **Prelude and Fugue in E-Flat Minor** is a solemn and searching affair. The Prelude, which features a migrating and embellished solo line against a chordal backdrop, resembles an Italianate Adagio or a soulful sarabande. Its dark key can be indicated in two ways: either with six flats, as in the Prelude, or with six sharps. Bach chose the latter for his austere Fugue, notating it in the obscure key of D-sharp minor. Its ingenious subject permits a wide range of contrapuntal tricks, from close imitation with itself (in "stretto," as we call it) to melodic inversion and even augmentation, in which all note values of the subject are doubled.

The **E Major Prelude** channels the familiar pastoral mode of the late Baroque. This shepherd's dance, with its lilting arpeggios and legato melodies, also exemplifies the *cantabile* or "singing" style that Bach himself promoted as a goal for all keyboard players. The **E Major Fugue** begins with what seems to be a snappy musical question: two notes followed by a short rest. A faster complementary idea introduces another

entry of the theme before the first seems to have run its course. Like several others in the collection, this fugue is all about witty play.

The earliest version of the **E-Minor Prelude** is essentially a finger exercise for the left hand, accompanied by simple chords in the right. In 1722 Bach revised this prelude by adding an arabesque-style melody in the soprano plus a coda that doubles the speed of the underlying rhythm. The **E-Minor Fugue**, with just two voices, resembles a two-part Invention but is actually a concerted fugue: there's even a couple of passages with both voices in unison, as happens in many a Vivaldi concerto.

Bach constructed his **Prelude in F Major** from the simplest of means: it's mostly arpeggiated chords and long trills. The broken-chord patterns are of two kinds, either fast or slow, and they exchange registers, passing back and forth between the hands. Trills happen in both hands as well, and for a good reason: it's the only way to sustain a long note on an instrument with such quick acoustic decay. **The F Major Fugue** is similarly lighthearted and adopts the rhythm of a popular dance type of the late Baroque: the *passepied*.

The **Prelude in F Minor** is sonorous and searching, with gentle figuration wandering through highly enriched harmonies. The **F Minor Fugue**, perhaps the grandest in the volume, relies on a slow and snaking subject with abundant chromaticism. Bach clothes this stern melody in modern dress by adding to it quicker figuration, producing quadruple counterpoint that just barely fits under two hands.

Bach differentiated this next pair sharply, with the major key carefree in mood and the minor quite grave. A lean two-part texture with abundant syncopations renders the **Prelude in F-Sharp Major** well suited to the buff or lute stop of the harpsichord, which dampens the plucking action with a small piece of soft leather. Its companion **Fugue in F-Sharp Major** features a cheerful theme in two short segments, against which Bach deploys a couple of additional, equally perky ideas.

At first glance, the **F-Sharp Minor Prelude** also resembles a two-part invention, but Bach slips thicker chords into its second half, as if to prepare for the majestic **F-Sharp Minor Fugue**. The slow-moving fugue subject sounds almost unmetered, with long notes that become steadily shorter as it crests over an initial arch. A more active countersubject produces streams of appoggiaturas or "sigh" figures, lending the whole a deeply expressive character.

The beginning of the **G Minor Prelude**, with its slow harmonic oscillation above a static pedal, resembles movements from various Bach cantatas and passion settings, though

on a smaller, more intimate scale. It sets a serious, expressive tone for what follows. The **G Minor Fugue** begins with a subject whose intervallic contours signaled deep pathos for generations of composers, from Bach through Mozart. Though Bach is generally quite consistent with fugal voicing, this four-part fugue is mostly a three-part fugue, with a sonorous conclusion that expands that texture to five voices.

The brief but virtuosic **G Major Prelude** is a veritable cascade of arpeggios, which alternate between the hands before encompassing both. This brilliant toccata-like piece introduces an equally lively but more rigorously developed **G Major Fugue**, whose gigue-like theme and concerted episodes generate considerable energy.

About the **Prelude in G-Sharp Minor**, an early admirer observed that Bach managed “to make melody out of the harmony, and harmony out of the melody,” Both harmony and melody are indeed intertwined in its leading idea, which is present in virtually every bar of this wistful prelude, though subtly varied throughout. For the companion **G-Sharp Minor Fugue**, Bach may have adapted his subject from traditional verset fugues for the organ. This fugue’s episodes, unusually, are not premised on new material but rather incorporate bits and pieces of the subject, especially its concluding pairs of repeated notes.

The **A-Flat Major Prelude** is one of the most modern pieces in the collection. An infectious polonaise rhythm permeates its texture, which is essentially just two perky voices fleshed out here and there with sonorous chords, akin to a short aria from a Baroque vocal work. Its companion **A-Flat Major Fugue** begins with a deceptively simple triad, articulated steadily in notes of equal value. Following this unassuming subject, busier figures appear, in the manner of a classic “Spielfuge.” The overall effect is more than just playful, however: Bach’s exploration of his thematic material produces counterpoint of great sophistication and charm.

The **A Major Prelude** features three interlocking melodic ideas that exchange their position in the texture multiple times. And yet, this cheerful Prelude wears its learning lightly; the intricate compositional procedure (second nature to Bach) is more apparent to the player than the listener. The **A Major Fugue** begins with an equally witty gesture: a single note...followed by rests. A brief continuation with melodic skips in both directions, more continuo figure than melody, comprises this ingenious fugue subject. A more fluid countersubject appears about one-third of the way through, with the initial idea returning solo just before the end.

The concise but eloquent **Prelude in A Minor** mines the potential of three discrete musical gestures: undulating neighbor tones, a lilting arpeggio figure, and scalar

passagework, whose gradual combination brings this seemingly lean two-part invention to a resonant final cadence. This prelude introduces the longest fugue in either book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Based on a subject reminiscent of Bach's concerted fugues, the **Fugue in A Minor** incorporates multiple contrapuntal devices such as melodic inversion and stretto, or closely overlapped subject entries. Bach's diligent research of contrapuntal potential produced impressive results here, in a densely imitative work that likely served as a virtuosic demonstration piece for the composer himself at the keyboard.

The **Prelude in B-Flat Major** from Book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is a virtuosic showpiece, a toccata in all but name. Its fast arpeggios and scales eventually give way to big chords that add majestic columns of sound around the quicker figuration. The companion **Fugue in B-Flat Major** is a marvel of contrapuntal engineering, with a jaunty subject paired with two countersubjects. This produces multiple rotations of essentially the same material, in invertible combinations distributed among three very active voices.

For Bach and his contemporaries, the key of B-flat minor signaled melancholy or even deep grief. Bach's dramatic **Prelude in B-Flat Minor**, with its steadily throbbing bass, seems cut from the same cloth as the opening movements of his surviving passion settings. The grave **B-flat Minor Fugue** subject, with its startling skip upwards of a minor ninth, was once full of meaning: it could represent wisdom, or perhaps despair or even madness. In Bach's hands, this learned theme enables high-level counterpoint, as he demonstrates in one intricate maneuver after the other, from stretto and canon to simultaneous subject entries in multiple voices.

The **B Major Prelude**, set in a bright but seldom-encountered key, explores the combinatorial possibilities of a couple of scalar figures, one unidirectional in long notes and the other a turning figure in short notes. The **B Major Fugue** begins with a subject that turns briefly around the tonic note before skipping down for a jaunty climb upwards. Though it seems lightweight, this fugue wears its learning lightly: halfway through, Bach casually inverts his subject a couple of times.

For his **Prelude in B Minor**, Bach took his cue from trio sonatas of Arcangelo Corelli, many of which begin with a similar kind of movement, with two closely entwined melody lines above against a "walking" bass. Adapting this texture to the keyboard, Bach shows that even a single player can produce a lovely trio. The imposing B minor Fugue begins with a subject that contains all twelve chromatic pitches, arranged in a series of appoggiatura or "sigh" figures that lend this fugue a heightened expressivity whenever the theme is present. Standing at the very end of Book 1, the **B Minor Fugue**

thus encapsulates one of Bach's primary aims for the collection: to demonstrate the possibilities of all the major and minor keys.