

JOHANN SEBASTIAN
BACH
THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER
BOOK I

THE RECORDING

Jörg Demus was only twenty-six when, in July 1955, he entered the Mozart-Saal of the Vienna Konzerthaus to record both books of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier for Westminster. The undertaking was substantial: forty-eight preludes and forty-eight fugues, recorded in mono over the course of that month. Book I initially appeared separately as Westminster WAL 221, a two-LP album supplied with a miniature score; the complete cycle followed as the five-LP WN 5501. It came at a revealing moment in Demus's career. He was already an international pianist, but his victory in the Ferruccio Busoni Competition still lay a year ahead. Westminster therefore captured not a veteran summing up decades of experience, but an unusually mature young musician setting down a work he had lived with since adolescence.

Demus's relationship with the music was already deep. By twenty-one he had memorised both books and had worked through several editions before settling on Donald Francis Tovey's. What emerges from the Westminster recording is neither an attempt to make Bach sound monumental on the modern piano nor an effort to disguise that instrument as a harpsichord. Demus uses the piano naturally but sparingly. Pedal is restrained, textures remain transparent, contrapuntal lines speak independently and phrases unfold without heavy rhetorical underlining. There is warmth but relatively little indulgence; character comes instead from articulation, pacing and the constantly changing relationship between voices.

That approach divided opinion when the records were new. A brief contemporary *Gramophone* notice described Book I as "conscientious" but "unexhilarating". Nathan Broder, reviewing the first volume in *High Fidelity* in September 1955, admired Demus's clean playing, control of finger weight and remarkable separation of the voices, while finding the interpretation too understated and lacking in intensity. The recording itself he judged first-rate. Returning to the complete set two years later, Broder still found the playing "clean and beautifully controlled", but considered it cool and insufficiently concerned with the inner life of the phrase.

Those judgements are fascinating now because the characteristics being criticised are essentially the same ones later listeners have come to value. Reviewing Demus's Westminster Bach recordings in 2023, Jonathan Woolf praised the directness, natural pacing and freedom from exaggeration of the Well-Tempered Clavier, finding Book II, if anything, still finer than Book I. Rob Cowan, writing in *Gramophone* that April, repeatedly encountered what he called a sense of "interpretative rightness" and wondered whether listeners had once been too reluctant to accept Demus's comparatively unforced way with Bach.

The reversal says something about changing fashions in Bach performance, but also about Demus himself. Throughout his long career he combined a modern pianist's command of colour with a growing fascination for historical keyboards and questions of performance practice. Even in 1955 that instinct for proportion is already present. These performances do not announce their seriousness; they proceed with poise, concentration and an unusual confidence in Bach's ability to make his own effect.

Demus would return repeatedly to Bach, recording the Goldberg Variations twice, the Partitas, concertos and other keyboard works. Yet this youthful Well-Tempered Clavier remains a cornerstone of his discography. Heard more than seventy years after it was made, its lack of display seems less an absence than a choice: a young pianist already completely at home in the music, allowing one of the great monuments of the keyboard repertoire to stand without scaffolding.

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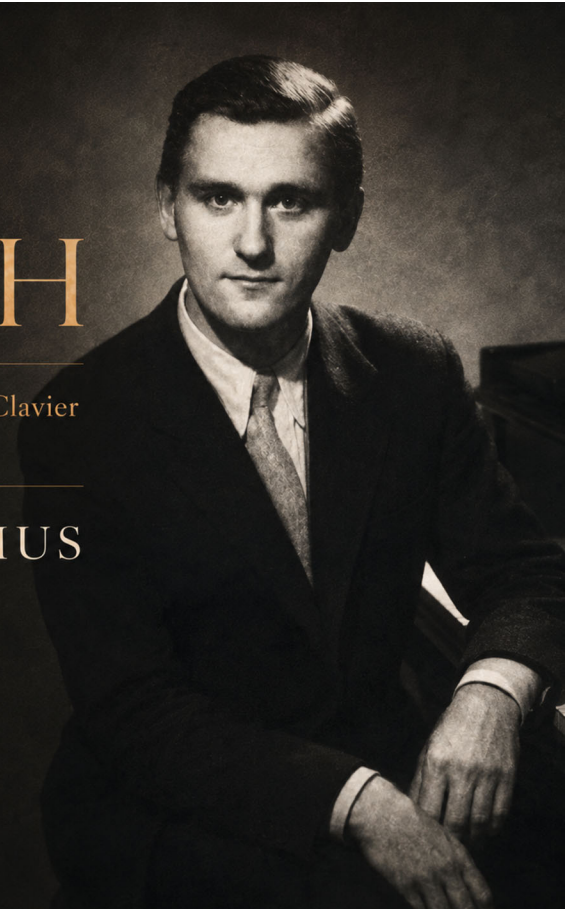
BACH

The Well-Tempered Clavier

BOOK ONE

JORG DEMUS

The 1950s recordings



JOHANN SEBASTIAN
BACH
THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER
JÖRG DEMUS

CD 1

BOOK I · TRACKS 1–24
62:44

1	Prelude in C major	1:36
2	Fugue in C major	2:54
3	Prelude in C sharp minor	1:31
4	Fugue in C sharp minor	3:24
5	Prelude in D major	1:29
6	Fugue in D major	2:48
7	Prelude in D minor	1:37
8	Fugue in D minor	2:47
9	Prelude in E flat major	1:19
10	Fugue in E flat major	1:51
11	Prelude in E minor	2:31
12	Fugue in E minor	2:23
13	Prelude in F major	1:42
14	Fugue in F major	2:36
15	Prelude in F sharp minor	1:54
16	Fugue in F sharp minor	2:46
17	Prelude in G major	1:52
18	Fugue in G major	3:06
19	Prelude in G minor	2:13
20	Fugue in G minor	2:29
21	Prelude in A flat major	1:53
22	Fugue in A flat major	2:31
23	Prelude in A minor	2:43
24	Fugue in A minor	3:52

TOTAL PLAYING TIME

2:05:08

Recorded July 1955
Mozart-Saal, Konzerthaus, Vienna
Ambient Stereo XR remastering by
ANDREW ROSE

CD 2

BOOK I · TRACKS 25–48
62:24

1	Prelude in F sharp major	1:47
2	Fugue in F sharp major	2:34
3	Prelude in F sharp minor	1:03
4	Fugue in F sharp minor	3:18
5	Prelude in G major	0:52
6	Fugue in G major	2:48
7	Prelude in G minor	2:14
8	Fugue in G minor	2:07
9	Prelude in A flat major	1:43
10	Fugue in A flat major	2:29
11	Prelude in G sharp minor	1:38
12	Fugue in G sharp minor	3:11
13	Prelude in A major	1:02
14	Fugue in A major	3:10
15	Prelude in A minor	1:07
16	Fugue in A minor	5:50
17	Prelude in B flat major	1:11
18	Fugue in B flat major	1:36
19	Prelude in B flat minor	3:11
20	Fugue in B flat minor	3:52
21	Prelude in B major	1:17
22	Fugue in B major	2:45
23	Prelude in B minor	5:48
24	Fugue in B minor	5:49

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