

JOHANN SEBASTIAN
BACH
THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER
BOOK II

THE WORK

Compiled about twenty years after the first book, Bach's second book of The Well-Tempered Clavier was assembled in Leipzig around 1740-42. Like Book I, it presents twenty-four preludes and fugues, moving chromatically through every major and minor key from C major to B minor. Taken together, the two books form one of the supreme monuments of keyboard literature.

The title does not mean equal temperament in the modern sense. Bach was writing for a 'well-tempered' tuning in which all keys were usable, each with its own shading and character. That possibility lies behind the extraordinary range of these forty-eight pairs. Some are compact and pedagogical, some dance-like, some meditative, some brilliantly extrovert; many are tiny dramas in which a prelude proposes a world and the fugue explores it more deeply.

Bach's own title page for Book I described the collection as written 'for the use and profit of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study'. That remains as good a description as any. The Well-Tempered Clavier is both practical and profound: a compendium of keyboard technique, a survey of contrapuntal possibility and a work of inexhaustible musical imagination.

Book II is often thought less immediately didactic and more varied in style than Book I. Its pages look outward to many idioms of Bach's mature years – galant elegance, concerto brilliance, dance rhythm, learned counterpoint and private introspection. Yet nothing feels merely encyclopaedic. Each prelude and fugue has its own profile, and the sequence as a whole carries the listener through a continuously changing landscape of colour, affect and invention.

On the modern piano these pieces ask above all for clarity, balance and an instinct for line. Their difficulty is not just digital. The performer must allow structure and expression to arise together. That challenge, and that freedom, help explain why The Well-Tempered Clavier remains central to every serious pianist's life.

THE PIANIST

Jörg Demus (1928-2019) belonged to the remarkable generation of Austrian pianists that came to prominence after the Second World War. Born in St Pölten, he entered the Vienna Academy of Music at eleven and studied piano, organ, conducting and composition. Further work in Paris with Yves Nat and later study with Walter Gieseking, together with masterclasses involving Edwin Fischer, Wilhelm Kempff and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, helped shape a musician whose playing combined classic poise with great tonal imagination.

Demus won first prize at the Ferruccio Busoni Competition in 1956, but by then his career was already under way. As a soloist he ranged widely through Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Franck and Debussy. He was equally admired as a chamber musician and accompanist, forming distinguished musical partnerships with singers such as Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and with instrumentalists including Paul Badura-Skoda and Josef Suk.

What made Demus distinctive was not only elegance or technical finish, but a particular sense of proportion. He disliked interpretative overstatement and tended to place the work itself at the centre of performance. That quality serves Bach especially well. His playing is lucid but not dry, affectionate without sentimentality and alive to the shape and independence of every line.

Demus was also one of the early modern pianists to take a serious interest in historical keyboards. Long before such curiosity became commonplace, he was exploring fortepianos and other period instruments, collecting them and using them in performance and recording. That interest never made him doctrinaire. Instead it seems to have sharpened his ear for articulation, colour and sonority on whatever instrument he played.

The 1955 Westminster recording of The Well-Tempered Clavier catches Demus at the beginning of his international fame, yet already in full command of his musical personality. It remains one of the clearest early documents of an artist whose finest performances always seemed to begin not with himself, but with the score.

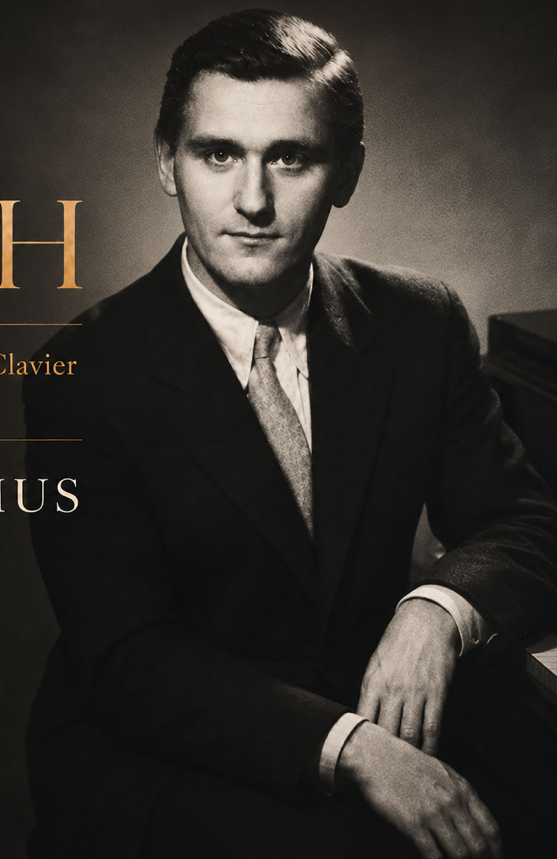
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BACH

The Well-Tempered Clavier
BOOK TWO

JORG DEMUS

The 1950s recordings



JOHANN SEBASTIAN
BACH
THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER
JÖRG DEMUS

CD 1

BOOK II · TRACKS 1-24
67:18

1	Prelude in C major	2:46
2	Fugue in C major	1:42
3	Prelude in C minor	2:19
4	Fugue in C minor	2:30
5	Prelude in C sharp major	2:10
6	Fugue in C sharp major	2:01
7	Prelude in C sharp minor	4:41
8	Fugue in C sharp minor	2:10
9	Prelude in D major	2:42
10	Fugue in D major	3:02
11	Prelude in D minor	1:34
12	Fugue in D minor	1:52
13	Prelude in E flat major	2:51
14	Fugue in E flat major	2:42
15	Prelude in D sharp minor	3:42
16	Fugue in D sharp minor	4:12
17	Prelude in E major	3:15
18	Fugue in E major	4:11
19	Prelude in E minor	3:40
20	Fugue in E minor	2:55
21	Prelude in F major	3:48
22	Fugue in F major	1:36
23	Prelude in F minor	3:04
24	Fugue in F minor	1:50

TOTAL PLAYING TIME

2:22:46

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

CD 2

BOOK II · TRACKS 25-48
75:29

1	Prelude in F sharp major	4:17
2	Fugue in F sharp major	2:58
3	Prelude in F sharp minor	3:08
4	Fugue in F sharp minor	4:24
5	Prelude in G major	2:16
6	Fugue in G major	1:33
7	Prelude in G minor	2:53
8	Fugue in G minor	4:07
9	Prelude in A flat major	4:23
10	Fugue in A flat major	3:50
11	Prelude in G sharp minor	2:08
12	Fugue in G sharp minor	5:05
13	Prelude in A major	2:00
14	Fugue in A major	1:14
15	Prelude in A minor	2:57
16	Fugue in A minor	2:00
17	Prelude in B flat major	4:21
18	Fugue in B flat major	2:37
19	Prelude in B flat minor	3:03
20	Fugue in B flat minor	5:41
21	Prelude in B major	1:40
22	Fugue in B major	4:37
23	Prelude in B minor	2:28
24	Fugue in B minor	1:49

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