

The *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Part 2 (BWV 870-893)

The *Well-Tempered Clavier 2* is the second collection of twenty-four preludes and fugues covering all tonalities which Bach completed around 1742. An astonishing demonstration of Bach's mature understanding of the compositional techniques and styles of the time, the collection has captured the imagination of musicians ever since. Together with the first set, which he wrote twenty years earlier, this two-volume work has become the core repertory of every keyboard player.

Origin

Unlike the majority of his vocal works, Bach's keyboard works were not composed with a specific occasion in mind, and there are scarcely any documentary references that explain why he composed them. WTC 2 is no exception. Yet we can learn a great deal about its origin by examining the circumstances in which the work was composed, studied by his students and appreciated by later generations through the surviving manuscripts.

While for WTC 1 we have Bach's definitive fair copy, there is no comparable source for WTC 2. Amongst extant sources are two autographs: an almost complete manuscript now held at the British Library, London (Add. MS. 35021), which consists of 21 prelude-fugue pairs in unbound double sheets, lacking the pairs in c#, D and f as well as the title-page; and a single-sheet manuscript containing the fugue in A_b (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin: Mus. ms. Bach P 274). For this study the former is the more important of the two, even though about a quarter of the material is in the hand of Bach's wife, Anna Magdalena. The London collection is a mixture of fair copies and less carefully-written scores containing amendments of a compositional nature. Although one cannot expect to find the final version of each movement in this type of copy, it is an extremely valuable source, as it sheds much light on how Bach compiled and developed the collection. According to Yoshitake Kobayashi's studies of the paper used and Bach's handwriting, Bach started working on this project around 1739 and completed it around 1742, the period overlapping with the publication of the two final *Clavierübungen*, i.e. the so-called 'German Organ Mass' and the 'Goldberg Variations'.

When considering the circumstances of the origin of WTC 2, it is crucial to take into account the fact that at the time Bach had several exceptionally able students who later became some of the most influential figures in the history of Western music: Gottfried August Homilius (Cantor at the Kreuzschule and Director of Music of the three main churches in Dresden): 1735–1742; Johann Friedrich Agricola (Director of the Berlin Royal *Kapelle*): 1738–1741; and Johann Philipp Kirnberger (arguably the most

influential music critic and theorist of his generation): 1739–1741. A manuscript copy in Agricola's hand (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin: Mus. ms. Bach P 595) is of particular interest in this context: in 1738 he copied four fugues in C, c, D and d that are early versions of the WTC 2-fugues in C#, c, E_b and d respectively. This suggests that the collection evolved from Bach's gathering together of teaching material for his students. Indeed, eleven movements out of forty-eight in WTC 2—which amounts to nearly a quarter of the entire collection—are known to have predecessors in the form of early versions, and undoubtedly many more originated in early versions that are yet to be discovered. However, the possibility that the work was commissioned by a patron or sold for profit cannot be ruled out.

After Bach's death numerous copies of the work were circulated, presumably as a result of an active promotion by family and students who took pride in its educational and artistic merits. Its wide dissemination tells a story of great success in spite of the fact that by that time fugues were widely regarded as an unfashionable, archaic form of composition.

The most fascinating clues about the work's origin come from the study of the process by which the work was compiled, as is evident from the London autograph. This shows that Bach did not compose the work from the first prelude in C to the last fugue in b; rather, he composed it in three distinct stages, as follows:

- Stage 1:** Bach swiftly assembled 12 prelude-fugue pairs, all in the commonly-used keys—c, d, E_b, E, e, F, f#, G, g, A, a, and b. While some movements show traces of being developed as he wrote them out, many are fair copies. Anna Magdalena helped her husband to speed up the process by copying nearly half of them.
- Stage 2:** The pace of compilation slowed down as it took more time for Bach to write 10 individual pairs in C#, c#, D, d#, f, F#, g#, B_b, b_b, and B. Note that most of them are in rarely-used keys. The pairs in c#, D and f, missing in the London autograph, must have existed and belonged to this group, as the study of the complete copies derived from the autograph shows.
- Stage 3:** At least one copy of the autograph was made prior to the work's completion. This copy later became the principal source for the first complete edition published by N. Simrock in 1801. It was presumably after his return from a short trip to Berlin in the summer of 1741 that Bach completed the project by adding the two remaining pairs—C and A_b. Except for the prelude in A_b, which may well have been a new composition, these movements were remodelled from pieces that were written more than 20 years earlier.

It thus appears that Bach adopted a flexible strategy in the composition of this work: it depended partially on the existence of sketches and draft versions, and partially on his impulse for composing new pieces for certain keys. The fact that the movements which were composed last were written on the same paper as the autograph of the Art of Fugue indicates Bach's shift in artistic pursuit in 1742 to a new publication project. Despite this, Bach appears to have continued revising the WTC 2 as frequently as opportunities arose.

Title-page

The absence of a definitive fair copy in Bach's hand also means that we do not have reliable information as to what he called this collection. As already mentioned, the London set lacks the title-page. The surviving copies derived from it suggest that Bach perhaps never wrote one for this set. The earliest complete copy of the work still extant (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin: Mus. ms. Bach P 430) has a title-page produced by Bach's future son-in-law, Johann Christoph Altnickol, who began his studies with Bach in 1744. For his carefully-produced fair copy, Altnickol supplies the following title:

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Second Part, consisting of Preludes and Fugues in all the tones and semitones, written by Johann Sebastian Bach, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, Capellmeister and *Directore Chori Musici* in Leipzig.¹

Although much simpler in wording than Bach's title-page for WTC 1, there is every reason to believe that this modest description originated from the composer himself. The date of the copy was inscribed after the last fugue: 'Scr[ipsit] Altnickol / a[nn]o. 1744'.

Bach's revisions

Apart from being the earliest complete copy to include a title-page, Altnickol's copy tells us three further important facts. Firstly, that Altnickol's model was not the London autograph, but another autograph set now lost. Secondly, Bach appears to have monitored Altnickol's copying, sometimes instructing him to make certain notational changes during the copying process. Finally, the manuscript contains numerous

corrections, ranging from Altnickol's own corrections of errors to later amendments of a musical nature, some of which are clearly identifiable as Bach's handwriting.

In the revisions we may find a reasonable explanation as to why Bach shifted his attention from the London autograph completed in c.1742 to the autograph set used as a model by Altnickol, which at the time presumably consisted of well-developed drafts and sketches. Alfred Dürr suggests that sometime between 1742 and 1744 Bach may have given the former source to his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, whose handwritten additions can be identified on some pages. It would thus have become necessary for Bach to bring the then incomplete set to the level and standard equalling the former. It is also plausible that Bach simply wanted to have another complete copy, as it seems to have been his standard practice not to lend his personal reference copy to students. Whatever the truth may be, it appears that Altnickol's model had already been updated before he started copying from it. Bach's revision work included the addition of all the Stage 3 movements and the expansion of two movements from Stage 1, namely the prelude in d and fugue in e, respectively interpolating eight new bars and extending the final section of the fugue by sixteen bars. Thus by 1744 this set would have been the more up-to-date copy in Bach's household, even though many movements from the London set were retained in the later version, as Bach apparently did not revise every movement in this set.

Bach's copying instructions to Altnickol provide us with important clues on the state of Bach's lost autograph. The numerous corrections Altnickol made in the prelude in C, for example, tell us that the right-hand part of his model was notated in the treble clef. Presumably for the sake of consistency, Altnickol was asked to transcribe it for the soprano clef, a task which he performed with some difficulty. Altnickol was also instructed to rewrite the fugue in b \flat and prelude in b in double note-values, as Bach himself had done for the London set, namely converting from $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{2}$ and from c ($\frac{4}{4}$) to ϕ ($\frac{2}{2}$ and halving the bar into two) respectively. In a sense, this aspect demonstrates Bach's efforts to make Altnickol's copy an up-to-date fair copy.

The matter of later revisions is complicated by the fact that the manuscript not only underwent thorough revisions by Altnickol and Bach, but also by one of its later owners F.A. Grasnich, who transferred the readings of another manuscript tradition which originated from Kirnberger's personal copy (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin: Am.B.57). A systematic study of these revisions reveal an extra layer of Bach's revisions found exclusively in this copy by Altnickol, which throws fascinating light on how Bach taught him. It also leads to the conclusion that from 1744 onwards this second, later lost autograph set and Altnickol's 1744 copy became the two most important sources in Bach's household for his other students to copy from.

¹ 'Des Wohltemperirten Claviers, Zweyter Theil, bestehend in Præludien und Fugen durch alle Tone und Semitonien verfertigt von Johann Sebastian Bach, Königlich Pohlnisch und Churfürstl. Sächs. Hoff Compositeur Capellmeister und *Directore Chori Musici* In Leipzig.'

What emerges from this study is that Bach never saw the end of the process of improvement, which continued into the students' copies, which makes the task of identifying Bach's latest thoughts very daunting. As far as can be traced, Bach did not make a definitive fair copy beyond what he had done with the London autograph and Altnickol's 1744 copy. As is the case with his other unpublished anthologies such as the *Orgelbüchlein* and the 'Great Eighteen' chorales, WTC 2 was a work which sprang from a unique combination of supply and demand that reflect the complexity of Bach's life: his teaching, a stock pile of his own compositions, inspirations based on the work of other composers, possible commissions and sales, and so on.

Character of a collection

There seems to be a general consensus among commentators that as a collection the WTC 2 is less attractive than its predecessor. This lack of enthusiasm has often been attributed to Bach's supposed attitude to the work: it is true that WTC 2, unlike his other major keyboard works from the same period, such as the *Clavier-Übung 3*, *Goldberg Variations* and the *Art of Fugue*, was not engraved on copper. The absence of a definitive fair copy lends further support to such an interpretation. Besides, it is also conceivable that the novelty of its twenty-four-key conception with specific reference to the tuning method, may have worn off by 1740s as similar works by Bach's contemporaries began to appear.

However, there is every reason to argue against such a one-sided view. As Philipp Spitta recognises, WTC 2 demonstrates a significant advance in formative power and a wealth of imagination in each piece. The preludes of WTC 2 are stylistically more diverse and often more substantial in size than those of WTC 1. The presence of a large number of binary movements in WTC 2 (c, D, d \sharp , E, e, f, G, g \sharp , a and B \flat), as opposed to a single one found in WTC 1 (b), reveals a new predilection towards *galant* tastes. Moreover, the preludes in D and B \flat have such an extended second section with a quasi-reprise that they could rightfully be considered precursors of the Sonata form. The key of A \flat is occupied by a concerto movement in both sets; but in WTC 2 the piece is more substantial and sophisticated. Among the non-binary types, we find examples of a more dense, elaborate texture, which create a profound tonal discourse. The fugues of WTC 2 also follow this trend: whereas the fugues placed at important junctions at nos. 12 and 24 are occupied by dark, chromatic subjects in WTC 1, their counterparts in WTC 2 are characterised by subjects of a lighter, 'modern' taste. The maturity of Bach's fugue writing is manifested not only in its firm footing in idiomatic keyboard technique (most fit comfortably under ten fingers), but also in its natural and transcendental beauty, as Mozart discovered in 1782: the fugues which he transcribed in his K.405 set (c, D, E \flat , d \sharp and E) are some of the finest examples rooted in the *stile antico* tradition. The stylistic diversity of fugal movements makes up for what might otherwise be felt as a lack of variety, given the fact WTC 2 contains exclusively 3- and 4-part fugues

(whereas WTC 1 includes one 2- and two 5 part-fugues). Bach intended to write twenty-four very individual pieces, and made no musical concessions to fit them into a confined mould of the work as a whole.

Bach's musical aims

When examining individual pieces of WTC 2, one notices some striking similarities of material which Bach explored in his other works. But unlike the parody technique employed in his vocal works such as the B-minor Mass, where previously-composed pieces are readily identifiable, the familiar passages of WTC 2 are not obvious copies; rather they take form of treasured ideas reworked as new and unique keyboard compositions.

The most obvious case is a fugue borrowing its subject from elsewhere. The fugue in E is one such case, often claimed to have been modelled on a fugue in the same key by Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer, from his collection *Ariadne Musica* (1702). Another instance is the recognisable chorale tune 'Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr' in the subject of the fugue in A. If we compare this subject with BWV 664 from the 'Great Eighteen' chorales, one is struck by the similarities of melodic embellishment. Was Bach conscious of them when writing the fugue for WTC 2?

In this context, let us consider two further examples of head-motifs of subjects from the fugues in a and C \sharp , both of which are four-note 'cross' figures but manifest distinct characters of their own. The head motive of the a-minor fugue is formulated by zigzag leaps of increasing distance. The emotional power of the subject is felt from the outset: starting on the dominant, the formation of the 'cross' completes with the fall of a diminished seventh; its separation from the remaining portion of the fugue subject by a rhetorical rest helps to create an atmosphere of increasing tension and poignancy. This expressive vocabulary can be compared with the turba chorus 'Laß ihn kreuzigen!' from the St Matthew Passion (BWV 244/45b). The other example—the cross figure of the fugue in C \sharp —carries a completely different affect (*Affekt*) from the example we have just examined: this motif is associated with a vivid description of an urging joyous spirit, such as 'Wacht auf!' (Wake up!) in the Bass arias of two of his cantatas, 'O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort' (BWV 20/8) and 'Unser Mund ist voll Lachens' (BWV 110/6), as well as in the 'Halleluja' choral movements from the cantata 'Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele' (BWV 143/7), 'Sanctus' (BWV 238/1) and cantata 'Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir' (BWV 130/1).

