

Bennington Baroque
Bach: Tempered and Transcribed
Sandra Mangsen, harpsichord

Carriage Barn
Park-McCullough House
North Bennington, VT

3:00 PM
24 September, 2017

**8 Preludes and Fugue from *Das wohltemperierte Clavier I*,
BWV 846–853 (1722)**

J. S. Bach
(1685–1750)

**C Major Prelude and Fugue à 4
C Minor Prelude and Fugue à 3
C# Major Prelude and Fugue à 3
C# Minor Prelude and Fugue à 5**

**D Major Prelude and Fugue à 4
D Minor Prelude and Fugue à 3
E♭ Major Prelude and Fugue à 3
E♭ Minor Prelude and D# Minor Fugue à 3**

Pause

**Partita No. 2 for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1004 (1720)
transcribed for harpsichord by Nanette Gomory Lunde (1976)**

**Allemanda
Corrente
Sarabanda
Giga
Ciaccona**

The harpsichord was built by David Jensen in 1990, and is modelled after 18th-century French instruments with two keyboards and three sets of strings. Its range is just under five octaves, GG to e³. Bach's music never goes above d³. It is tuned at A=415 Hz, about a semitone below the modern A440, in Kirnberger III.

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Bach left two volumes of preludes and fugues “through all tones and semitones,” that is, in all of the keys, both major and minor. The title, *Das wohltemperierte Clavier*, raises two important questions: how did Bach imagine an instrument would be tuned so as to play in all of the keys, and at exactly which keyboard instrument did Bach expect the pieces to be played.

By 1722, the date of the autograph manuscript, the old mean tone tunings had been supplanted by “circular tunings” enabling keyboardists to play in all of the keys. 18th-century theorists described many such tunings beyond the modern equal temperament. There has been much talk, but no definitive conclusion about what Bach’s favorite tuning may have been; note, however, that the only thing in tune in equal temperament is the octaves (perfect fifths are narrow, and major thirds are wide). The advantage of other temperaments is that they impart a different flavor to each of the keys: some sound much “rougher” than others, some are more placid. In the eighteenth century, many writers attached emotional terms to the various keys—F-minor was “pathetic,” B-flat major “regal,” etc. This is not fanciful, since the keys did sound quite different. But note that writers did not agree on such descriptions, probably because different tunings were favored in different places. In Kirnberger III, for instance, C-E is absolutely pure, that is, without beats, whereas C#-E# is, shall we say, a bit rougher. One might also remember that the 24 preludes and fugues in Book 1 were probably not meant to be played as a cycle, in a single tuning. A harpsichord or clavichord, the most likely household instruments Bach’s students would have played daily, can easily be retuned to accommodate the more “difficult” keys, those with many sharps or flats.

“Clavier” in mid eighteenth-century Germany simply meant keyboard. Later in the century it more often referred to the clavichord, the much softer cousin of the harpsichord. So any of the keyboard instruments found in Bach’s Germany might have been employed: organ, harpsichord, clavichord, the early piano. The pieces are exercises in both composition and in keyboard technique, and together illustrate the wide range of keyboard pieces in use by Bach and his contemporaries. They are pieces for private study and performance at home, not in the larger venues of the church or even the coffee house.

The preludes vary: some are simply animated chord progressions (C, c, D), a 2-part invention (C#), a perpetual motion movement for violin and bass (D), or dances (e as Sarabande; c# as loure). The E♭ Prelude is itself a large double fugue, that is a fugue with two distinct subjects. As for the fugues, there are no “rules,” beyond the idea that each voice should state the subject in turn in the Exposition. Then anything can happen, although all demonstrate efficient and creative use of the initial material. Some have episodes, passages with no full statements of the subject (c, C#, D, d, E♭); some have *stretto* passages (wherein statements of the subject are overlapped in short-lived canons (C, d, d#). The c# fugue has three distinct subjects, introduced one after the other, and then intertwined. The most interesting contrapuntal manipulations are in the d# fugue: beyond the *stretto* passages, the subject is inverted (tipped upside down), and presented in augmentation (note values are doubled), against the original versions. The C# fugue has a complete recap of the exposition, but with an extra voice. Often Bach evades an expected cadence (c#, D), and several fugues add a brief coda after the “final” cadence on the tonic (C, c, c#, D). The Fugue in D is reminiscent of French opera overtures: the subject has a busy upbeat figure followed by several dotted notes: not to go into detail on this point, but the dot was a “variable quantity” in baroque music. I’m being inconsistent on purpose.

On the matter of transcription. Bach and his contemporaries often arranged and rearranged their own pieces and those of other composers for instruments and ensembles other than those originally intended. Remember that they had no turntables or CD players. For instance, Bach arranged concertos by Vivaldi and Marcello for organ. In that spirit, I offer a modern transcription of the well-known D-Minor Violin Partita. It works well on the harpsichord, and is certainly not as challenging as it is on the violin!