

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# Back to Bach

*Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* revisited

STEPHEN DAW

**T**HIS article owes its existence to a series of recitals at London's Wigmore Hall early in January this year, during which the French-based harpsichordist Davitt Moroney played the whole of both parts of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*<sup>1</sup> within well under thirty-six hours. It concerns the meanings of words used by Johann Sebastian Bach in connection with his keyboard music and the contexts within which they should be considered. The author would like to place on record his appreciation to Davitt Moroney for infusing his overall account with so many excellent qualities that he actually deserves much of the credit for the

present piece of work, although its deficiencies are obviously the author's. Moroney started with an enlightened introductory lecture and in the following two days played each book's contents in five recitals, using a chromatically ascending succession as the ninety-six movements are set out. In trying adequately to assess Davitt Moroney's achievements, which were in many respects excellent and exemplary, I found myself confronted with a number of questions, most of which are not new but which seemed to be crucial in the fulfilling of that task.<sup>2</sup>

### Temperament

First, there is the now long-debated problem of what Bach meant by *Wohltemperirte*. Even Davitt Moroney baulked at confronting this problem in his spoken introduction, stating simply that it is today becoming increasingly fashionable to judge that, after all, the expected temperament was essentially equal throughout the system, or if not, something very close to it. This is of course the result of musicological deliberations about evidence and context, but perhaps these are neither at all conclusive—the evidence being rather slim and distant—nor capable of proof; we have no recordings and no scientific measurements of any conclusive nature concerning J S Bach and fine tuning. All we know is that both he and his sons were paid to tune harpsichords at certain stages. How they did this remains unchronicled.

There is an opposed and, some would say, an even less helpful or contributory argument which almost certainly lies behind the idea that 'well-tempered' does not mean 'equal-tempered', and since it was probably this that first gave rise to the questioning of an assumption formed in the 19th century and well established by the middle of the 20th that equally tempered tuning had been expected by Bach, it should be mentioned. This is the fact that those performers and tuners who have regularly tuned their own instruments using a variety of systems during the last forty years or so nearly all accept the musicologically researched favouring of equal tuning with resignation and disappointment. They feel that there always was something

Malcolm Crowthers



Davitt Moroney

wrong about equal semitones in Baroque music. Perhaps familiarity with the repertoire, together with a facility to experiment which in general is not available to pianists, is actually not so weak an argument after all. Players of unfretted clavichords and harpsichords both invite contrasts in tuning, and fretted clavichords (which were widely used in J S Bach's time) have always had to find their own ways of dealing with problems of fine tuning; it would be unwise, though, for us to try to decide on which particular refinement of a basic tuning we refer to today as, say, 'Werkmeister III' Bach might have chosen to favour, if indeed any.

**M**ORE worrying is the inadequacy with which any writer has really approached the range of possibilities available to the tuner in this work. A very high proportion of scholars and players assumes that Bach was expecting one tuning for all of the movements in each Part, but that is presuming

(i) that the work was intended to be played in large chunks, and especially in chromatic sequences. Although Davitt Moroney did choose to do this in modern concert circumstances, an available recording by Colin Tilney presents the pairs of movements in keys which rise or fall in cycles of fifths; he has also performed the two Parts cyclically through the keys in fifths during concert series. It would be very easy indeed to retune either equally or in some more 'perfect' tuning regularly during even a complete cycle managed in this way. And supposing Bach actually hoped for a single temperament for each key which was not actually equal, but rather one which he personally preferred, then many of the arguments usually applied to defend equal temperament become far less valid. We would recall that Bach had been born into a musical world where there were a number of traditions of 'preluding and tuning simultaneously' before playing formally. Systematic retuning as one progresses through a cycle of fifths is a quick, comparatively easy matter, and certainly one effect of playing these pairs of movements in succession without breaks for consideration in between is an accumulated exhaustion for both hearers and performers which seems to be at odds with what we know of Baroque attitudes.

(ii) that the title is meant to indicate anything special about fine tuning at all. A book of photographs called *Camera at the Ready* would not be very surprising and a book on orchard gardening might be fancifully called *The Well-Honed Blade*.

(iii) that Bach's feelings regarding good temperament remained unchanged over a period of about twenty years, since as far as I know nobody has yet suggested different tunings be accorded to Parts I and II. This last idea is slightly against the evidence of Prelude and Fugue no. 8 in each book. In Part I, Prelude 8 is in E $\flat$  minor and Fugue 8 follows it in D $\sharp$  minor. Whatever Bach's reason for doing this—and no explanation readily stands out—in Part II both Prelude 8 and Fugue 8 are presented in D $\sharp$  minor in both Bach's autograph (of c. 1742) and all other sources.

There is no certain conclusion regarding the meaning of *Wohltemperirte* implied by any of this, but it does at least indicate that even those who have rigorously examined the successive movements of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* with regard to their ranges of tonal vocabulary and syntax cannot expect to produce conclusive evidence either, since nowhere is there any clear statement on a number of important considerations.

### Instrument

A second question concerning the meaning of that other essential word, *Clavier*, which apparently preoccupied scholars in the 1950s, need not long detain us here. The word was orthodox for many years before 1721 and after 1744 as a generic term for any keyed instrument. Bach had access to virtually every genre of keyboard instrument current in his lifetime, not excluding large organs: probably, by 1744, already a Silbermann pianoforte, a lute-harpsichord (*Lautenwerk*), possibly a Pantaleon (a keyed dulcimer) as well as presumably large and small harpsichords and clavichords. He probably considered some of these instruments more or less suitable for certain works throughout his keyboard œuvre, and his published *Übungen* were apparently for specified types although they were all produced within the period between the commencement of Part I and the complete assembly of Part II of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*.

Today though, we place less faith in ideas such as that which claims all music written in quasi-harmonic polyphony to be 'essentially choral in character, hence most appropriate to the organ', because choral styles were manifestly played on all kinds of instruments, with all kinds of associations, including most keyboard instruments. The *Ricercare* of the *Musical Offering* were composed for keyboards, it is now

agreed, but certainly not for organ—at least not initially.

During Davitt Moroney's playing it did occur to me that even if one chooses to play the whole work on a harpsichord, one must be careful. The instrument used on this occasion was a good copy of a classical French instrument upon the model for which I have heard parts of the same Bach *œuvre* played. It had been carefully maintained and prepared for this particular recital series by a distinguished and expert team. In his recently reissued recording of Part I,<sup>3</sup> Moroney plays an instrument by John Philips, which also sounds essentially French. But Bach's music mostly sits rather high on French instruments. I must confess that I prefer North German instruments for this music: the sonorities are differently distributed and Bach's incomparably expressive bass lines are all the more effective for not being rendered too prominent on instruments such as modern copies of the Russell Collection's two big, late products of the Taskin workshop. These are far better suited to contemporary and later French music.

Sadly, nobody seems to bother to transpose any of the material—which Bach certainly did do—so that it suits a particular instrument better; even those who advocate equal temperament have not done this so far, although it is hard to see why not.

### The meaning of *cantabile*

Another interesting point is what Bach meant by the word *cantabile*. It is not used with direct regard to either Part of the '48' but it must refer to such music since it comes in the rather more detailed heading which prefaces the Inventions and Sinfonias, some of which were close in origin with Part I of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*. Their autograph reads thus:

A sincere guide, in which lovers of keyboard music, and in particular those wishing to learn, are shown in a clear way . . . not only how to play faultlessly in 2 parts, but also . . . how to treat three obbligato parts correctly and well; and at the same time not only to be inspired with good inventions, but also to develop them properly; and most of all to achieve a *cantabile* manner of playing and to gain a strong foretaste of composition.<sup>4</sup>

Recently it has become customary for scholars to consider that Bach's special, and here implied as essential, *cantabile* has to do with his compositional technique: we are asked to think of all the polyphonic lines in a Bach piece as being

composed in a way that has the character of a sung line in a vocal ensemble. Certain comments made by C P E Bach, Kirnberger and Ernst Ludwig Gerber reinforce this view that Bach's individual strength of compositional style derives from this unique recipe of combined expressive strands. However, the preface actually states that it is 'a *cantabile* manner of playing' that is to be sought. Although this might be a reference to the task of adequately characterising each part in the polyphony, it does not actually say so. What, then, does *cantabile* really mean?

IT IS obvious that of all keyboard instruments—in this order—first the clavichord and then the harpsichord give the attentive player the most subtle control over the generation of sound. The organ comes a close third and early pianos and keyed dulcimers fourth, with the modern piano the furthest removed from immediate control. Of all these, only the clavichord facilitates control over the sound after its initiation so that, for example, the variations in the tautness of the string may achieve certain kinds of vibrato. In the case of harpsichords and the related *Lautenwerk* the exact way in which the closely channelled plectrum strikes, stretches and releases each string, under optimum conditions controls to a considerable extent the sound we hear. Rapid and unyielding depression of the key will result in quite a percussive attack as the strings are actually hit by the plectra, followed by the immediate sounding of the note. Exactly how the note is sustained, its speed of fade and the tonal ingredients of all this process will depend partly on voicing, partly on the instrument's structural character. A slower, sensitive approach and a careful cultivation of taking up and releasing the string may increase the ratio of tonal 'bloom' to percussive noise, and will, on a well-regulated instrument, produce a far more 'singing' style.

This basic facility of harpsichord technique is often taught to players at an early stage today; the idea accommodates itself happily alongside C P E Bach's instruction that the finger should curl back towards the player whilst depressing a note, but a consistent norm of fingered attack is lost by many much more advanced players: when there is elaborate polyphony to be articulated faithfully it is easy to see how and why. The difficulties are, however, best overcome by approaching Bach's more difficult music via the two- and three-part *cantabile* playing of the Inventions and Sinfonias.

## Articulation

It is refreshing indeed to hear Davitt Moroney playing conjunct notes short and at times disjunct notes joined or held, to hear the same subject articulated in different ways in contrasted contexts within one movement, or even simply hearing Bach's wonderfully resourceful music played with something one could call a wonderfully inventive originality. So much music of all times has been described as calling for a performance which imitates vocal style, yet vocal styles have changed and are often far from certain at early periods in any place: we need to avoid assuming for example that similarly approached music should be accorded a claustrophobic legato on all conjunct notes. We should expect an exploitation of variety of delivery, either within or between pieces, even where the variety may itself need to be limited by its particular contexts, but the very idea of varying articulation of the same thematic line at different stages of a single movement would have surprised many teachers and players of the last 200 years: it seems thoroughly appropriate when Davitt Moroney uses it positively and differently in identical movements recorded in 1988 and live in 1995.

Perhaps the single word 'articulation' is too vague for what we imply by it. If it denotes the commencement, the holding and the cessation of each note, then that is all very well, but we really need words for all three in harpsichord and other related music. Wherever the instrumentalist has control over the sound, all the notes played as part of the line may be drastically or very subtly contrasted, in any piece at any time. Lack of clarity regarding this matter

has resulted in many under-prepared and under-achieving performances, some of them even by artists of the highest reputations.

## Evidence from Gerber and Altnickol

During his spoken introduction at the Wigmore Hall, Moroney referred to the report by the lexicographer Ernst Ludwig Gerber on his father, Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber's studies of the work with Johann Sebastian Bach in around 1724. Of particular interest is his reference to what is presumably Part I of the '48':

At the first lesson he set his Inventions before him; when he had studied these through to Bach's satisfaction, there followed a series of Suites, then the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. This latter work Bach played altogether three times through for him with his unmatchable art, and my father counted these among his happiest hours, when Bach, under the pretext of not feeling in the mood to teach, sat himself at one of his fine instruments and thus turned these hours into minutes.<sup>5</sup>

**P**ARTICULARLY interesting here are two points: firstly, the account of the father's studies by the son exactly fits preserved copies of Bach's music made by Heinrich Nicolaus, often with important added ornamentation, even including some in the master's own hand. Secondly, the reference to playing this work 'altogether three times through for him' seems to indicate some wholesale activity by Bach in performing at least Part I. A complete account of these forty-eight movements took Bach 'hours' (very probably about two) in 1724. Surely this evidence indicates either a heavily discussed series of performances, or even one possibly interrupted by attentions to fine tuning adjustments. This point seems to have escaped those seeking evidence regarding the



Part of the A minor Prelude in Bk 2 of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* in the new edition by Richard Jones.

Bar 24, beats 2-4 show E, F and A♭ not found in other sources

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temperament question, although of course time might have been taken even tuning equally were Bach's ear to have been particularly keen. Although the account is second-hand it is likely to be accurate since Gerber junior was a careful writer on musical matters and since his father had obviously treasured these lessons. The suggestion that three total accounts were played and eagerly listened to is interesting in itself. Of course, the idea that Bach had played the work through altogether three times might be a reference to accounts spread between lessons, might be a rough estimate rather than an exact report and may have been exaggerated anyway, either by accident or design.

The most recent evidence regarding Part II also implies careful extended study, once more with a single special pupil who copied out the work involved. Here, the individual concerned was to become Bach's only son-in-law, Johann Christoph Altnickol. He was a student of the composer almost exactly twenty years later than H N Gerber. There is no written account of Bach's playing sections or selections from either Part to Altnickol, but far more significant is the latter's copy, which has been so attentively adjusted in the composer's own hand that it represents the most complete late version of the work and is to form the basis of the second of two complete chronological versions of Part II by Dr Alfred Dürr for the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*. Many of its detailed adjustments have been printed already in the new Associated Board edition by Dr Richard Jones (London 1994). Research into the sources by Alfred Dürr and by Dr Yo Tomito of the University of Leeds is still continuing but without question the Altnickol copy of Part II is among the most important recent discoveries in Bach scholarship. It was therefore all the more useful that Davitt Moroney played from Richard Jones' highly commended edition during his January recitals. Modern performers should take note. There is hardly a better way for an interpreter to waste his energies or time than in the scrupulous preparation of notes which the composer did not intend him to play. That does not mean that one should aim to give a single, let alone 'definitive' account of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*: one of the delightful aspects of Davitt Moroney's Bach is that one feels as though he is still making spontaneous choices over the details of his performances as he plays. The work's power and drama are the richer for these possibilities.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here is used J S Bach's own title and spelling, clearly written in his own hand in the autograph fair-copy of Part I. Other contemporary references and headings include both the (today more orthodox) 'Wohltemperierte' and the (less orthodox) 'Clavir'. Since spelling variants have no real significance, the combination used by Bach himself in the most definitive source associated with the work seems appropriate, even though modern editors still use modernized spellings.

<sup>2</sup> A short review of the performance by the author has been published in *Early Music News*, London March 1995

<sup>3</sup> Some movements from the recording, made in July 1988, have just appeared at reduced price on one CD: Harmonia Mundi (France) HMP 3901285. Timing: 77'23

<sup>4</sup> Autograph copy, made in Cöthen, 1723, remaining unpublished in Bach's lifetime. Trans. from Wiener Urtext, ed. Ratz & Füssl, Vienna 1973

<sup>5</sup> E L Gerber, *Historisch-biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler*, Part I, Leipzig 1790; trans. H T David & A Mendel

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