

Back to Bach

Margaret Fingerhut immerses herself in the order and clarity of Bach's fugues, discovering a sense of optimism amid the chaos of the pandemic

Margaret Fingerhut: 'The character and vitality of Bach's music lives and breathes through imaginative articulation and phrasing'

If I were to be given a penny for every musician and music lover who has turned to Bach in these disturbing times, it wouldn't matter that all my concerts have been cancelled due to the pandemic. Like every musician, I went into lockdown with a suddenly empty diary stretching endlessly ahead of me. I suspect, also in common with many people, I hatched overly ambitious plans about how I was going to fill this newly-found time: it would be an opportunity to catch up on all those gaps in my repertoire I had been meaning to address for years, get super-fit, learn a language or two, read 50 books and finish my accounts (alright, maybe I wouldn't be that ambitious!).

But as the weeks passed, those intentions faltered. One by one, my magnificent plans fell by the wayside. It didn't help that I had developed a low-grade chronic infection – no, not *that* one, and fortunately nothing sinister – but it meant I could not summon up the requisite energy. As each day/week/month merged into the next, I was finding the likes of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* and Schubert's Sonata in C minor D958 too monumental to tackle. Of course, these composers remain vitally important to me, but with this pandemic I found the superhuman qualities of late Beethoven too out-of-reach to be of earthly comfort, and Schubert too unsettling with his smiles and darkness so deeply entangled. Chopin's yearning for his homeland made my heart overly heavy, Schumann's split personality proved too distressing to cope with, the resignation of late Brahms struck me as unbearably sad... and so it went on.

I am certain I would have sunk into total despair were it not for Bach. So, what is it about his music that unflinchingly drew me to the piano every morning during lockdown, even at my lowest ebb? And why did I turn to the 48 Preludes and Fugues rather than, say, his Partitas or Suites?

Schumann said, 'Let the *Well-Tempered Clavier* be your daily bread', and so it has proved to pianists for nearly three centuries. I find that working on a prelude and fugue each day provides definition and structure, preventing the days from merging into one another. There is a prelude and a fugue for every mood and almost every level. Every one of the 48 inhabits its own world and character, with corresponding technical challenges. The sheer variety is simply breathtaking – from unbridled joy to profound grief and sorrow, from cheeky humour to desolation, from exuberant dancing to solemn introspection.

It is well known that Bach's music offers spiritual comfort and solace, so it is unsurprising this should be doubly so in dark, dystopian times. In addition, the order and clarity of his music serve as a balm amid the chaos we are currently experiencing. Everything is in balance – intellect, heart, mind and soul. Starting each day with a prelude and fugue will prepare you physically, mentally and emotionally, and, as a bonus, it will lift your spirits and energise you. I defy anyone not to feel more cheerful after playing the A-flat Prelude from Book I. In a mere 90 seconds it will brighten your day. Even Bach's most despairing and anguished fugues usually resolve into the major, the *terce de Picardie* giving us a wonderful sense of catharsis and optimism.



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The fugues are what impelled me towards Bach's 48 in lockdown, rather than his other keyboard works. As we try to cope with an out-of-control universe, Bach's fugues are like a musical metaphor for how civilisation could be, a sort of utopia where every voice is equal. Each voice has its turn with the subject and countersubject, and the performer has to ensure that the other voices always allow it to be heard. There is no better way of improving finger independence than through practising fugues! Even when the intensity increases in a stretto, we must mastermind the dialogue so that every subject entry can still be heard. It is tempting to look on fugues as the musical equivalent of Twitter conversation – but oh, such civilised ones! And, given our current preoccupation with social bubbles, we can enjoy our own little fugal bubbles of 3, 4 or 5 voices.

Fugues are bound by rules and regulations, but Bach often flouted these rules – and always to good purpose. He was never anarchic and always kept within the boundaries of good taste. In a world beset with inequality and authoritarianism, the fugues are an antidote as they speak to us in such a rational, ordered but always intensely humane manner.

It is said that Nadia Boulanger made her students memorise every voice individually, even in a 5-part fugue! As a teenager, I bought the wonderful old Steingraber edition of the fugues that presents each voice on a separate staff – a very useful visual aid. I had been given a thorough grounding in harmony and counterpoint by my first teacher, which included studying several of the 48. As a schoolgirl, I was also lucky enough to take part in the Bach Choir's annual performances of the *St Matthew Passion* under Sir David Willcocks at London's Royal Festival Hall. I sang in the ripieno chorus as well as taking part in the chorales. Even though I was already a confirmed atheist, being on the same stage as Janet Baker singing 'Have mercy, Lord, on me' had a profound and lasting emotional impact on me. After that, I could never look on Bach as a dry, academic composer. When I went to college, I enthusiastically took up harpsichord studies and at one stage seriously considered focusing on the harpsichord for my career. In the end, however, I realised I enjoyed playing the harpsichord far more than listening to it!

It took a good 10 years before I felt truly comfortable playing Bach on the piano, but I would now not have it any other way – the piano brings out the best in his music. The advantages of endless dynamic possibilities, beautiful singing tone and rich sonority far outweigh the disadvantages, which are anyway solvable given the right approach. In any case, Bach's keyboard music was not written with any particular instrument in mind. His favourite was the clavichord because of its sensitivity and expressive potential, although its delicacy meant it was totally unsuited for anything other than the smallest of spaces.

Bach is on record as praising the sonority of the new fortepianos by Gottfried Silbermann, although he also commented on the weak treble and complained that the touch was heavy and difficult to control. This heaviness

remains a challenge on modern pianos: how to achieve the requisite clarity in fast, running passages, especially in the resonant lower register played by the left hand. I find it helps to feel firm contact with the keys, as if you had steel in your fingertips – press and release – backed up by perfectly weighted, free arms. Just don't try and imitate earlier keyboard instruments with lots of staccato playing, or you might as well play it on the harpsichord.

By all accounts Bach's own playing was very 'conversational', so it is a mystery how his music has so often come to be performed as if in a straitjacket – rigid and without nuance. The character and vitality of his music lives and breathes through imaginative articulation and phrasing. Once we understand the stylistic parameters of Bach's day, the blank canvas of his scores allows us incredible freedom to be creative and individual. This is especially liberating as we struggle with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

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The key thing is to be convincing with your choice of tempo. The piano offers myriad opportunities to shape phrases through voicing as well as varying touch and tone. The aim, according to Bach in his own preface to his *Inventions*, is 'to arrive at a singing manner in playing'.

This brings us to the vexed question of pedal. The deeply expressive feeling of the Prelude in E-flat minor from Book I would be unimaginable if played without the sustaining pedal. The mood is desolate and empty, but not dry, so I keep the pedal somewhat shallow. I also make judicious use of *una corda*. The sustaining pedal is almost never needed in Bach's fast music, which requires utmost clarity. In slow music I do lots of finger legato and finger substitutions. As ever, let your ears be your guide. I like to think that the pedal in Bach is used 'homoeopathically', ie its presence cannot be detected. Or, as one of my students once said: 'Ah, secret pedalling!'

Ornamentation is also a challenge when playing Baroque music on a piano. This is a huge topic, but it is worth remembering that embellishments were often used to compensate for the harpsichord's deficiencies, particularly its inability to sustain a note. Certain ornamentation which might be appropriate on a harpsichord can therefore sound pointless and overly fussy on a piano. The most important thing is always to maintain stylistic good taste.

The rewards of studying Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues are manifold. It nourishes our spirit by giving us rationality in an irrational world, humanity in an age of hatred. In the current crisis, Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* has certainly made this pianist feel better tempered! **IP**

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