

## MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Fall 2018

Prof. Smey

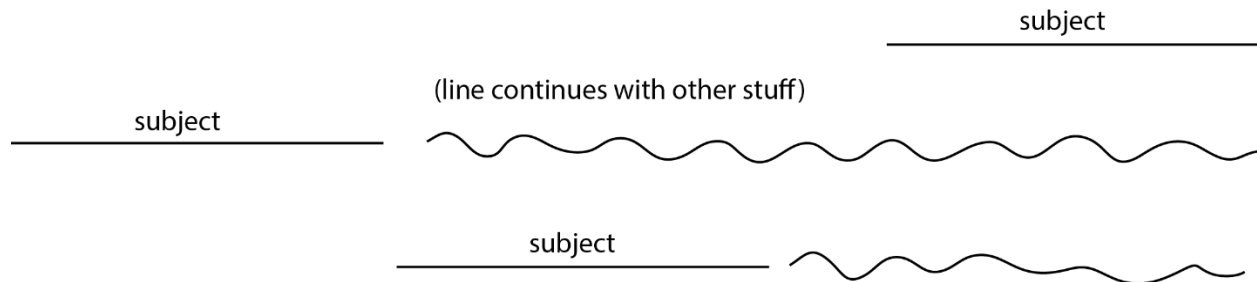
Class 10 – Thursday, Oct 4

We started this session with a lecture on triads, the basic building blocks of music from the Baroque period onward. I have an [HTML lecture about that](#) online. Then we turned to J. S. Bach and the Fugue.

### Bach's "Little" Fugue in G Minor

Our next work from the Baroque period is a Fugue, which I described as "the ultimate polyphonic piece." A fugue features multiple lines (which we like to call "voices," even though nobody is singing) that combine in a complex web of music.

It is organized around a frequently repeated melody called a *subject*. The subject is introduced at the very beginning of the piece in a single, unaccompanied voice. Additional voices then enter, one at a time, also leading with the subject, like so:



This opening sequence, in which each voice presents the subject, is called the *exposition*.

After the exposition we get more statements of the subject separated by *episodes*. Episodes are our in-between, connective parts which tend to be looser and more exploratory. Often they are based on little fragments taken from the subject.

Thus, the fugue is a lot like ritornello form – instead of ritornellos it has statements of the subject. Both forms have relatively stable areas of music that are characterized by instantly recognizable material, but the fugue subjects are a little more complicated and the boundaries between the subject and episodes is more fluid, less "chunky." In both forms the more stable and familiar parts are connected by the looser episodes.

## *The Well-Tempered Clavier*

Next we considered one of Johann Sebastian Bach's great masterworks, a collection of 48 Preludes and Fugues called *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

A Prelude is simply a kind of introductory piece. It is supposed to get us used to the sound of the scale we are working with. This sets the stage for the more elaborate fugue, which is the same kind of polyphonic exploration of subject and episodes we talked about earlier.

Bach wrote a Prelude and Fugue for every possible key. There are 12 possible major keys and 12 possible minor keys, so that makes 24 sets, and he went through the cycle twice, generating a total of 48 pairs. We listened to a performance of the Prelude and Fugue in G major from Book I, and compared it to the Prelude and Fugue in G minor from Book I. Each key has its own personality – the G major sounds light, fast, and complex, while the G minor is at first very thoughtful (in the prelude) and then stern and almost angry (in the fugue.)

Here are youtube links if you missed it or want to rehear.

[J. S. Bach, Prelude and Fugue in G Major from WTC Book I](#) (Sviatoslav Richter playing, shows the sheet music)

[J. S. Bach, Prelude and Fugue in G Minor from WTC Book I](#) (Joanna MacGregor playing)

## **Why is it called The “Well-Tempered Clavier”**

### **Clavier = Keyboard Instrument**

The term “Clavier” in the title is just a generic term meaning “keyboard instrument.” We looked at the main keyboard options Bach would have had in his lifetime – the harpsichord and a little box-shaped instrument called the clavichord. The piano was not invented yet, but these days it is considered perfectly appropriate to play the Well-Tempered Clavier on a modern piano.

### **Well-Tempered = Well-Tuned**

The “Well-Tempered” part of the title refers to a surprising problem in music – the various scales do not mesh together perfectly. If we take an instrument and tune it so that a single scale (like, say, C major) sounds as good as it possibly can sound, this will cause other scales (like, say, A-flat major) to sound out of tune. The art of tuning the keyboard so that all scales are in a compromise that sounds reasonably good was called “finding the temperament,” and it took several centuries to perfect this practice. (Now that we have electronic tuners and know how to do logarithms it is easy to break an octave into 12 perfectly equal parts, but they didn’t have that technology back then!)

Thus, if you can play all the way through Bach’s volumes and every piece sounds good, you know that your keyboard instrument is “well-tempered.”