



ACT 2: IN SEARCH OF PERFECTION

Johann Sebastian Bach was almost certainly the most famous organ and keyboard virtuoso of his era. His extraordinary playing technique and unrivalled improvisational skill turned heads from his early years. It's no wonder, then, that Bach wrote outstanding works for keyboard instruments throughout his professional life.

In his role as cantor of St Thomas's Church in Leipzig, Bach wasn't obliged to play the organ. Nonetheless, he capitalized on the autonomy his position offered, performing recitals, inspecting organs, and teaching composition, piano and organ to a multitude of private students.

It was in Leipzig that Bach began the systematic publication of his compositions for the keyboard, organ and other instruments. He developed seminal collections across genres and styles, such as 'Clavier-Übung I-IV', 'The Well-Tempered Clavier, Part Two', 'Musical Offering' and 'The Art of the Fugue'.

Relentlessly seeking perfection, Bach advanced musical ideas using every trick in the book as he probed their compositional potential. In doing so, he maximized polyphony and delved into the "most hidden secrets of harmony", as his student Johann Friedrich Agricola put it. As a result, Bach produced timeless works encapsulating his pioneering musical inventiveness and unparalleled creative abundance.

AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF KEYBOARD MUSIC ...

A defining characteristic of Bach's oeuvre lies in the encyclopaedic structure of his collections, each underpinned by a fundamental musical principle. One such project that stands out is his four 'Clavier-Übung' volumes showcasing masterpieces spanning all the significant styles, genres and techniques of keyboard music.

Bach borrowed the title 'Clavier-Übung' from his predecessor, Johann Kuhnau. However, Bach's collection goes far beyond études, containing an assembly of distinctive, high-quality masterpieces. The first volume contains six partitas, each a series of dance-like melodies arranged as a suite. Each partita opens with a free-form introductory movement, followed by a diverse range of stylized dance movements rich in variations.

The second volume contrasts the two main styles of European music. For the 'Italian Concerto', Bach adapted the Italian orchestral concerto for the dual-manual harpsichord. The 'French Overture' begins with a solemn opening movement, followed by ten dance movements inspired by the French orchestral suite. The two manuals of the harpsichord imitate solo and tutti sections.

Clavier-Übung I: Partitas, BWV 825–830

First printing, 1731 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtischen Bibliotheken, Musikbibliothek Peters

Bach originally published his partitas individually between 1726 and 1730, before compiling them into a six-part opus in 1731. On the title page, he recommended the suites — featuring “preludes, allemandes, courantes, sarabands, gigues, minuets, and other gallantries” — to “enthusiasts for the refreshment of their spirits”.

Clavier-Übung II: Italian Concerto, BWV 971, and French Overture, BWV 831

First printing, second edition, Nuremberg, c.1736 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Nowadays, the three-movement Concerto in the Italian taste in F major is world-famous. Far less well known, however, is the impressive Overture in the French style in B minor. Bach juxtaposed two distinct musical styles as well as major and minor tones in these works. His idea of transferring orchestral genres to the two-manual harpsichord was truly ground-breaking.

... FOR ORGAN AND HARPSICHORD

Through his 'Clavier-Übung', Bach introduced himself to a wide audience as a composer of keyboard music, establishing an expansive repertoire for organ, harpsichord and other keyboard instruments.

The third volume, devoted to the organ, stands out due to its unusual structure. Twenty-one chorale arrangements are presented in the style of a large organ mass. Bach arranged each chorale twice: once for a large organ with pedal, and again for organs without pedals. His compositions offer sensitive interpretations of the chorale texts, showcasing the genre's mesmerizing richness. This volume also includes four intricate duets. The extensive collection is bookended by a majestic prelude and a monumental triple fugue.

Volume IV contains the famous 'Goldberg Variations', where Bach took the art of Baroque variation to an unprecedented level of sophistication. Find out more about them in our central display.

Clavier-Übung III

Johann Sebastian Bach's personal copy | First printing, Leipzig, 1739 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken/Musikbibliothek Peters

This collection heralded a new era in organ music, elevating the art of the chorale prelude to new heights and setting a benchmark for generations of composers to come. This copy was in Bach's possession.

Clavier-Übung IV: Goldberg Variations, BWV 988

First printing, 1741 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken/Musikbibliothek Peters

The 'Goldberg Variations' are regarded as a pinnacle of keyboard composition and a crowning jewel of Baroque variation technique. From the bassline of a graceful aria, Bach developed a rich cycle of thirty variations meticulously arranged within an elaborate overall structure. In it, he unfurled a kaleidoscope of the most diverse moods and musical ideas. Each variation has its own unique character. Intricate canons segue into virtuoso movements, such as suite dance movements and other familiar types, showcasing Bach's ability to blend a wide array of musical styles, techniques and structural means.

EDUCATIONAL COMPOSITIONS IN ALL KEYS

As the cantor of St Thomas's, Bach had a crucial teaching role. Upon his arrival in Leipzig in 1723, he brought along an innovative teaching aid — “for the benefit and use of aspiring musical youth”. ‘The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I’ contains 24 preludes and fugues in every major and minor key. Each prelude is succeeded by a fugue (from the Latin ‘fuga’, meaning flight), where the theme intricately navigates through all parts in compliance with the strict principles of counterpoint.

The term ‘well-tempered’ refers to a tuning system that first enabled playing in all keys. In contrast to ‘pure’ or ‘mean-tone’ temperament, in well temperament, intervals were deliberately tuned with a slight impurity. This facilitated a distribution of intervals that eliminated the perception of being out of tune.

Around 1740, Bach expanded the collection by adding a second part. The preludes and fugues within ‘The Well-Tempered Clavier’ are expressive masterpieces brimming with poetic resonance. Through this iconic and highly influential educational work for keyboard music, Bach elevated the art of composing pairs of preludes and fugues to unprecedented heights.

The Well-Tempered Clavier I

First printing, published by Hans Georg Nägeli, Zurich, 1801 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

The collection became widely distributed during Bach's lifetime thanks to the copies made of it by his students. Around fifty years after Bach's death, the two parts of ‘The Well-Tempered Clavier’ were printed for the first time. Notably, Ludwig van Beethoven, who studied the work from a young age, owned a copy of this edition.

The Well-Tempered Clavier II

First printing, published by Hoffmeister & Comp., Wien / Bureau de Musique, Leipzig, 1801 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

‘The Well-Tempered Clavier’ appeared in numerous editions from 1801 onwards. It became a beacon for many musicians during the 19th century. Robert Schumann recommended the work in his ‘Rules and maxims for young musicians’ (1850):

“Let ‘The Well-Tempered Clavier’ be your daily bread. Then you are sure to become a proficient musician.”

BACH'S MASTERY OF THE FUGUE

In Bach's musical philosophy, counterpoint — the complex interaction of independent musical parts — played a vital role. It regulated the arrangement of consonances and dissonances, embodying divine harmony and order.

Bach often showcased the diverse possibilities of instrumental counterpoint in collections. For instance, in the 'Goldberg Variations', the 'Musical Offering' and 'The Art of the Fugue', he ingeniously developed an array of canons and fugues from a single theme. The inexhaustible richness of these collections captivated subsequent generations and inspired them to new studies and interpretations.

Bach worked on 'The Art of the Fugue' until the final stages of his life. In the famous 'Fuga a 3 Soggetti', which only survives as a fragment, he wove in his musical signature — the sequence of notes B–A–C–H (the German notation for B flat, A, C and B natural).

Musical Offering, BWV 1079

First printing, no place or date Preface dated Leipzig, 1747 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtischen Bibliotheken, Musikbibliothek Peters

In 1747, during a visit to Frederick II in Potsdam, Bach was presented with a theme played by the king on his newly acquired fortepiano. In response, Bach improvised a fugue on this theme. Upon his return, he reworked the theme into two fugues, a trio sonata, and ten canons, dedicating the entire collection to Frederick II.

The Art of the Fugue, BWV 1080

First printing, second edition, 1752 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken/Musikbibliothek Peters

'The Art of the Fugue' comprises fourteen fugues and four canons. Bach elaborately transformed the theme into simple fugues and counterfugues, double and triple fugues, mirror fugues and canons. He imbued each movement with its own unique expressivity, turning what could have been a series of mere études into a profound musical experience.

MUSICAL SCIENCE

In the final decade of his life, Bach explored the intricacies of the canon. Drawing inspiration from the well-known German Christmas carol ‘From Heaven above to Earth I come’, he crafted a masterclass in canonic composition: the ‘Canonic Variations’. This sophisticated organ work comprises variations based on Martin Luther’s hymn. Its structure and motifs share similarities with ‘The Goldberg Variations’, albeit with one key difference — the Canonic Variations are based on a melody rather than the bassline..

For the first four variations, Bach wrote contrapuntal parts to the melody of the hymn starting at different pitches as canons. In the fifth variation, he ingeniously reworked the carol’s melody itself as canons. Finally, Bach fused all four lines into a dazzling conclusion with the sequence of notes B–A–C–H (the German notation for B flat, A, C and B natural) concealed in the closing bar.

Bach presented the Canonic Variations when he was made the fourteenth member of the Corresponding Society for Musical Science in 1747. The aim of the society was “to elevate musicology to a state of perfection, encompassing not only the history of music, but also relevant aspects of philosophy, mathematics, rhetoric and poetry.”

Canonic variations on the Christmas carol ‘Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her’ (‘From Heaven above to Earth I come’), BWV 769

First printing, Nuremberg, 1748 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtischen Bibliotheken, Musikbibliothek Peters

In this set of five variations for organ with two manuals and pedal, Bach systematically demonstrated some of the many different ways in which a canon could be arranged. As in ‘The Art of the Fugue’ and ‘The Musical Offering’, Bach showcased here his mastery of counterpoint.

TRAINED ON BACH

Bach's keyboard compositions, unlike his vocal works, didn't fade into obscurity. Bach himself published some of his most important collections in print. His works were propagated by his students, ensuring that Bach's teachings would enlighten generations to come. Johann Christian Kittel was a case in point. In 1801, he began publishing a three-volume guide to organ-playing. In his preface, he stated that his teaching method had been "entirely shaped by Bachian principles". Kittel passed on Bach's ideals to his many students, ensuring they were preserved.

In 19th-century musical salons, the trend leaned towards increasingly virtuosic piano music that focused primarily on external effect. However, at the same time, a growing interest in the music of past eras blossomed among music connoisseurs. They found in Bach's profound and intricate compositions an alternative path brimming with ceaseless inspiration. Adolf Bernhard Marx, a Berlin composition teacher, was among the most influential proponents of Bach's music. He introduced his students to a selection of Bach's piano and organ works, offering an intensive study in polyphonic composition.

Johann Christian Kittel: The prospective practical organist

Volume 1, Erfurt, 1801 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Kittel (1732–1809), the organist at the Preachers' Church in Erfurt, was one of Bach's last students. He based his organ manual on Bachian principles and included numerous references to Johann Sebastian Bach. This copy was part of the music collection owned by the organist Johann Christoph Bach (1782–1846) from Bindersleben in Thuringia.

Selection of Sebastian Bach's compositions

Edited by Adolf Bernhard Marx, introduced at the Berlin Conservatory of Music Second, expanded edition, London, Berlin, 1853 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

In this edition, Marx (1795–1866) gathered preludes, fugues, suite movements and chorale preludes to provide an "initial acquaintance with Bach". He meticulously explained each piece and supplied detailed performance instructions. According to Marx, studying Bach's polyphonic music required an examination of the individual parts "based on their content" and an understanding of their interplay in an "expressive, truly dramatic dialogue".

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

Artworks by Elisabeth Müller (born in 1946 in Meppel, Netherlands)

Thirty-part series of paintings (Fig. 1)

2011-2015 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Elisabeth Müller's art is a playground of geometric figures. Mirroring, rotating, reversing, splitting, fragmenting and intertwining are recurring principles that echo throughout her creations. She has discovered similar patterns of transformation in the compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach, whose music she plays every day on the piano. Nevertheless, although inspired by Bach's music, her aim isn't to reproduce it exactly in her art.

In her series of paintings 'Goldberg Variations', Müller weaves together six basic shapes with shades of white and grey to generate intricate, constantly evolving patterns. The restrained colour palette serves a distinct purpose — it directs our attention entirely to the variations in form and the ceaseless movement they embody. The focus isn't on the individual shapes, but on the processes and forces at play.

Sixteen Paper Models on Sixteen Paper Pedestals (Fig. 2)

2015 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Visual artist Elisabeth Müller finds boundless inspiration in Bach's 'Clavier-Übungen'. To her, the infinite richness of these compositions serves as a metaphor for the aesthetic she aspires to in her own work. She brings this concept to life in her paper models, exploring the interplay of six fundamental shapes that form the heart of her 30-part 'Goldberg Variations' series and translating it into three-dimensional space and colour.

Six Paper Models on Sixteen Planes (Fig. 3)

2014 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Reading the novel 'Doctor Faustus' by Thomas Mann inspired Elisabeth Müller to explore Bach's keyboard compositions. The epiphany that her constructivist works shared a common framework with Bach's counterpoint compositions was a pivotal moment for her. She transfers this concept into her paper models, brilliantly translating the variations and basic shapes at the core of her 30-part 'Goldberg Variations' series into three-dimensional space and colour.

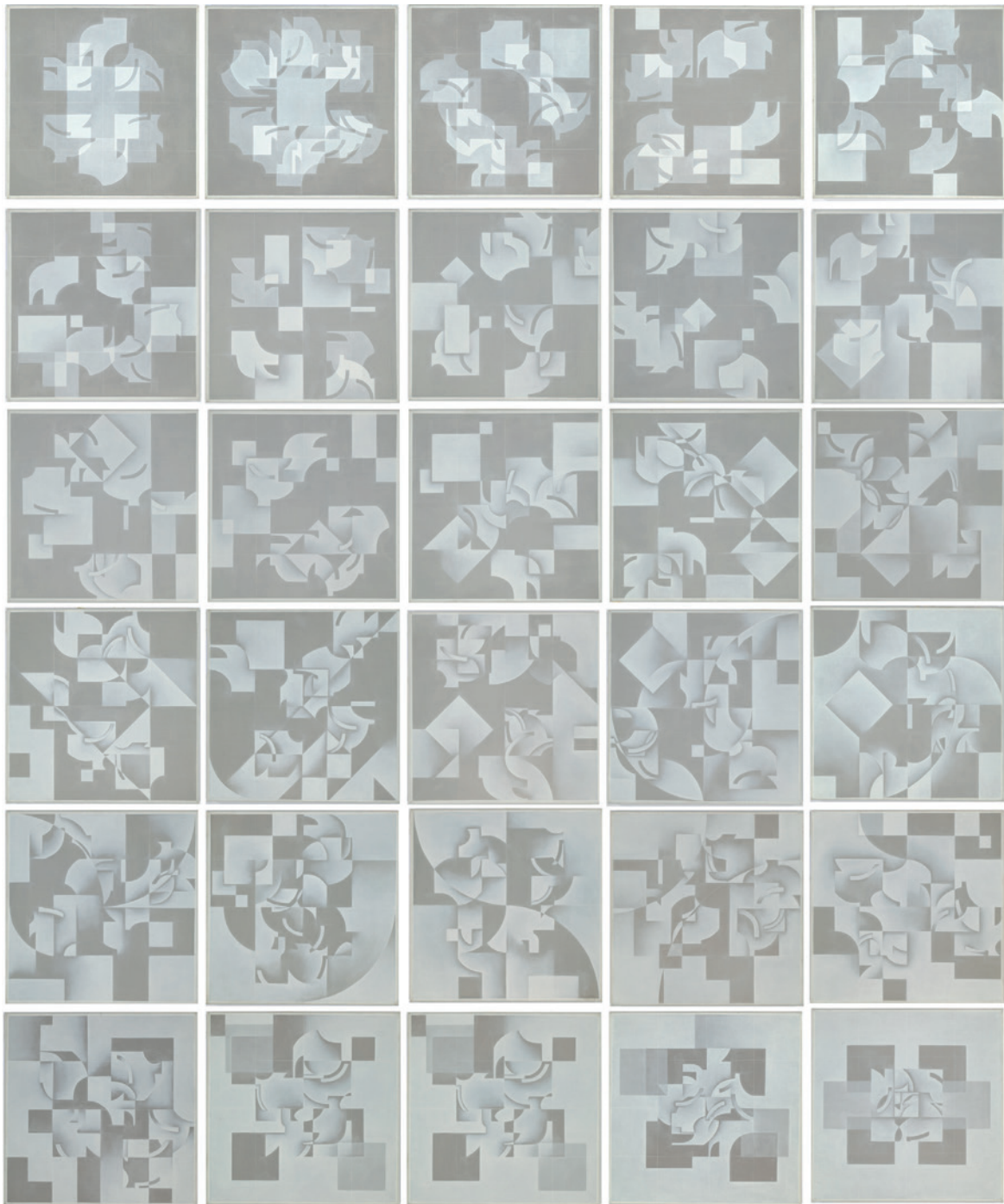


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

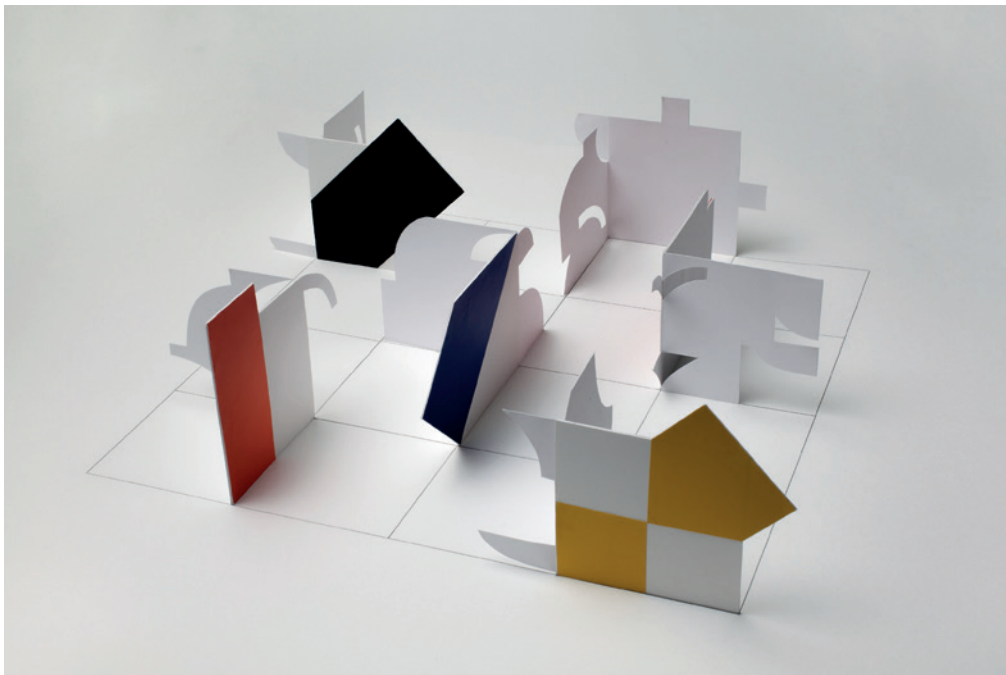


Fig. 3

Music to the exhibition on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72BluaFOLKLpMGHLFherMF?si=93396020dc4943aa>

The exhibition is kindly co-funded by



Ostdeutsche Sparkassenstiftung
gemeinsam mit der
Sparkasse Leipzig

mit Hilfe des PS-Lotterie-Sparens



© Bach-Museum Leipzig

Written by Henrike Rucker and Kerstin Wiese | Exhibition designed by Leila Tabassomi and Jens Volz | Photos by Gert Mothes