



A Bach Keyboard Extravaganza
Matthew Dirst: Harpsichord & Organ

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Prelude and Fugue in B-flat Major BWV 866

Nicolas de Grigny (1672-1703)

Excerpts from the *Livre d'Orgue*

Dialogue à 2 Tailles de Cromorne et 2 dessus de Cornet

Dialogue de Flûtes

Dialogue sur les Grands jeux

J.S. Bach

Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major BWV 852

J.S. Bach

Two Cantata Transcriptions, transcribed by M. Dirst

Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe BWV 156/1

Valet will ich dir geben BWV 95/3

Johann Ludwig Krebs (1713-1780)

Trio in E-flat Major

Adagio - Un poco Allegro

J.S. Bach

Prelude and Fugue in A Minor BWV 865

Nikolaus Bruhns (1665-1697)

Praeludium in G Major

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About the Program

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* is the only work of Johann Sebastian Bach that never went out of style. Unlike his church and chamber works, which were mostly forgotten soon after his death in 1750, the *WTC* served as a musical Old Testament for generations of students and enthusiasts—a role it still plays today. Comprising two sets of twenty-four preludes and fugues each in all the major and minor keys, the work was dedicated by the composer in 1722 “for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study.” This initial volume (Book 1) proved so useful that Bach assembled a comparable cycle (Book 2) in the early 1740s.

As Bach himself predicted, the *Well-Tempered Clavier* has always served complementary purposes: as compositional and keyboard pedagogy of the highest order and as recreational music to be enjoyed on one’s own, or perhaps in the company of like-minded friends. As such, it’s ideal fare for a virtual program.

The **Prelude in B-flat major from Book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*** is a virtuosic showpiece, a toccata in all but name. Its fast arpeggios and scales eventually give way to big chords that add majestic columns of sound around the quicker figuration. The companion fugue is a marvel of contrapuntal engineering, with a jaunty subject paired with two countersubjects. This produces multiple rotations of essentially the same material, in invertible combinations distributed among three very active voices.

Nicolas de Grigny’s 1699 *Livre d’orgue* is one of the high points of the French Baroque organ repertoire. Even Bach thought so: he copied out this source in its entirety. This volume includes a complete “organ mass,” meaning a mass with alternating plainchant and organ versets. From those movements, I’ve chosen three “dialogues,” as they’re called, that demonstrate distinct colors of the French Classic organ. The first juxtaposes the pungent *Cromorne* against the penetrating *Cornet*, while the second is a gentle movement for the flute stops. The final *Dialogue* calls for the “grands Jeux”: literally, the “big stops” of the instrument, meaning the powerful reed pipes. The middle of this last piece also features echo effects, produced by repeating short phrases in succession on multiple keyboards.

Several preludes in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* seem to have begun as improvisations on standard harmonic sequences. Not so with the **Prelude in E-flat major from Book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier***. Despite its leisurely opening, this is the most ambitious prelude in the entire volume. It features two distinct motives, the first scalar and searching and the second a more concise upward stride followed by a slow descent. Bach gives each of these ideas a short independent exposition, then combines them in a *tour-de-force* of uncommon contrapuntal and harmonic richness. In comparison, the E-flat major Fugue seems almost an afterthought, with its lighthearted subject and gently burbling texture.

Like most of his contemporaries, Bach transcribed many of his own works, usually to repurpose them in other contexts. In that spirit, this program continues with two of my own **transcriptions**

from Bach cantatas. The first of these is a sinfonia that Bach himself rescored and embellished heavily as a slow movement in one of his later harpsichord concertos. Its lovely melody and gentle pizzicato accompanying figure transfers equally well to the organ. The second is an ingenious trio featuring a well-known Palm Sunday hymn melody, around which weave two artful obbligato lines.

Both **Johann Ludwig Krebs** and his father Johann Tobias Krebs studied with J. S. Bach. The younger Krebs, the last great German organist of the eighteenth century, left a substantial body of organ music, including this tuneful and utterly gallant Trio. Along with Krebs's other works of this type, this pair of gently contrasting movements gave new life to a genre in which his teacher excelled: trios for a very busy single player.

Bach's concise but eloquent **Prelude in A Minor** mines the potential of three discrete musical gestures: undulating neighbor tones, a lilting arpeggio figure, and scalar passagework, whose gradual combination brings this seemingly lean two-part invention to a resonant final cadence. This prelude introduces the longest fugue in either book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Based on a subject reminiscent of Bach's concerted fugues, the **A-minor Fugue** incorporates multiple contrapuntal devices such as melodic inversion and stretto, or closely overlapped subject entries. Bach's diligent research of contrapuntal potential produced impressive results here, in a densely imitative work that likely served as a virtuosic demonstration piece for the composer himself at the keyboard.

Not much music survives from **Nikolaus Bruhns**, one of the leading North German organists of the generation preceding that of Johann Sebastian Bach. A student of Dietrich Buxtehude, Bruhns embraced the North German "fantastic style," which mixes rhetorically inspired rhapsodic passages with discrete fugal sections. His **Praeludium in G Major** offers a kaleidoscope of different textures and procedures, from the virtuosic figuration of its opening and closing sections to multiple fugues based on essentially the same repeated-note subject. Even the feet get a good workout in this piece, with pedal solos and an initial fugue with six voice parts: four for the hands and two for the feet!

Notes by Matthew Dirst 2021

About the Artist

Matthew Dirst, recently described in the *Washington Post* as an "efficient, extremely precise conductor who has an ear for detail," is the first American musician to win major international prizes in both organ and harpsichord, including the American Guild of Organists National Young Artist Competition and the Warsaw International Harpsichord Competition. Widely admired for his stylish playing and conducting, Dirst leads Ars Lyrica Houston, a period-instrument ensemble with several acclaimed recordings, one of which—J. A. Hasse's *Marc Antonio e Cleopatra*—was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2011 for Best Opera. His degrees include a PhD in musicology from Stanford University and the *prix de virtuosité* in both organ

and harpsichord from the Conservatoire National de Reuil-Malmaison, France, where he spent two years as a Fulbright scholar. Equally active as a scholar and as an organist, Dirst is Professor of Music at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston, and Organist at St. Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston. His publications include *Engaging Bach: The Keyboard Legacy from Marpurg to Mendelssohn* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *Bach and the Organ* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

Learn more at Ars Lyrica Houston's website arslyricahouston.org

About the Baroque Music Festival, Corona del Mar

Directed by Baroque violinist **Elizabeth Blumenstock**, the festival typically offers five professional concerts over eight days every June. We enjoy the talents of extraordinary musicians playing Baroque instruments, and of singers who are sensitive to historical styles, performing in intimate venues in Corona del Mar and Newport Beach. In 2020-2021 we offered a number of virtual events: visit bmf-cdm.org/videos to watch them at your leisure! The festival's mission is to present the astounding wealth and diversity of the Baroque era in a wide variety of ways. Large-scale works, with and without singers, are typically offered on our Sunday concerts, while our three mid-week programs give the opportunity to enjoy smaller scale vocal and chamber performances, all given by the finest musicians in the historically informed Baroque field. Save the dates for our 2022 in-person festival: June 19-26, 2022.

Learn more at our website bmf-cdm.org