

# Jeremy Denk plays The Well-Tempered Clavier: Book 1

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate end time:** 10pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

## Programme

**Johann Sebastian Bach** *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1*

1. Prelude and Fugue in C major, BWV 846
2. Prelude and Fugue in C minor, BWV 847
3. Prelude and Fugue in C# major, BWV 848
4. Prelude and Fugue in C# minor, BWV 849
5. Prelude and Fugue in D major, BWV 850
6. Prelude and Fugue in D minor, BWV 851
7. Prelude and Fugue in Eb major, BWV 852
8. Prelude in Eb minor and Fugue in D# minor, BWV 853
9. Prelude and Fugue in E major, BWV 854
10. Prelude and Fugue in E minor, BWV 855
11. Prelude and Fugue in F major, BWV 856
12. Prelude and Fugue in F minor, BWV 857
13. Prelude and Fugue in F# major, BWV 858
14. Prelude and Fugue in F# minor, BWV 859
15. Prelude and Fugue in G major, BWV 860
16. Prelude and Fugue in G minor, BWV 861
17. Prelude and Fugue in Ab major, BWV 862
18. Prelude and Fugue in G# minor, BWV 863
19. Prelude and Fugue in A major, BWV 864
20. Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV 865
21. Prelude and Fugue in Bb major, BWV 866
22. Prelude and Fugue in Bb minor, BWV 867
23. Prelude and Fugue in B major, BWV 868
24. Prelude and Fugue in B minor, BWV 869

**Today's concert marks an anniversary that may have passed you by: for 300 years ago, in 1722, J S Bach proudly presented a set of 24 Preludes and Fugues.**

The intention was that they be of use to 'musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study'. So, you might be wondering, what's all the fuss about? These 24 pieces run through all the 24 major and minor keys, hence their rather clunky title, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. A clavier was a general term for a keyboard instrument that in Bach's time would most often have referred to a harpsichord or a clavichord. 'Well-tempered' has nothing to do with mood and is in fact a subject fraught with complex theories, so let's keep matters simple: it refers to a mode of tuning that is equalised, so works equally well in every key. As time has progressed, this work, together with its sister set (Book 2) of some 20 years later, has become more simply known as the *48*.

Bach was above all a practical musician – things had to have a purpose, whether they were teaching aids or sacred music for the services at his local church. Yet, such is his genius, what he produced was invariably elevated to another level. This explains why the *48* has become, to use a much-overused term, iconic: Beethoven, no less, called this the Bible.

Many will have been confronted by Bach's *48* as students – the preludes varying vastly in scope and difficulty, while the fugues, written for anything up to five 'voices' (though more usually three or four), make demands on the mind even more than the fingers. Bach's genius lies in the way that every single prelude and fugue within the set is elevated from a mere exercise to something with true emotional impact. That explains why the *48* has become such a fixture in the concert hall, in much the same way as Chopin later took the study (or *étude*) out of the practice room and into the salon.

But, 300 years on, the *48* is still fraught with decision-making that ranges from the choice of instrument to how to interpret the notes on the page (Bach left no indications of speed nor expression marks).

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Jeremy Denk describes that conundrum eloquently: 'The first prelude is the foundation – let there be light! – and what you see on the page is a set of arpeggios, nothing more. For the premise of a grand project there is no grandiosity; there are only three austerities. There is no melody; each measure has the same rhythm; each bar has the same contour. In this monotonous stream of arpeggios, there is no distraction, no "surface noise", and so we hear clearly when two notes come dissonantly close and are resolved, and we take notice when a voice leaps up, climbs, or descends in a long line: all these motions, the raw materials of musical meaning, are revealed like stage machinery that suddenly comes out from behind the scenes. The craft of voice-leading itself becomes the focus of attention and proves more riveting than the usual show.

'Bach is synonymous with the fugue – the music of proposition, propagation, permutation. And the fugue was hardly the most mathematical of his genres. One of Bach's sons related the story that his father would hear a musical idea and would instantaneously know all the operations that could be carried out on it. Think about it – a musical idea is not a catchy tune, it is something operable; calculations can be performed on it. Like a musical-mathematical savant, Bach would then wait for these things to occur: for the idea to be played backwards (retrograde), or upside down (inversion), or twice as slow (augmentation), whatever; and he was gleeful when arcane combinatorial expectations were met. It is a powerful element of the Bach aura: no matter how much you tell yourself that it's just music, you cannot resist hearing the play of numbers, the cosmic calculus. But Bach is a multi-tasker: his logic is unassailable but it is not tedious. His proofs soar. He captures the deepest feeling while remaining perfectly logical, thereby demonstrating that those imperatives are not at all opposed.'

And therein lies the mystery of Bach's music – the way that he transmutes logic into something powerfully emotional. Today we couldn't imagine a musical life without the *48* and down the ages it has proved seminal: without Bach's example the fugues of Beethoven, whether in the *Hammerklavier* Sonata or the *Diabelli Variations*, would be unimaginable. In that sense, though his aims were so modestly stated on that title-page back in 1722, J S Bach bestowed a gift upon humanity that is as potent today as it ever was.

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## Performers

**Jeremy Denk** piano

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