

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Pierre-Laurent Aimard: Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier

Saturday 9 May 2026, 3pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bach The Well-Tempered Clavier Book 2, BWV.870–893

Preludes and Fugues:

1. BWV.870 in C major
2. BWV.871 in C minor
3. BWV.872 in C sharp major
4. BWV.873 in C sharp minor
5. BWV.874 in D major
6. BWV.875 in D minor
7. BWV.876 in E flat major
8. BWV.877 in D sharp minor
9. BWV.878 in E major
10. BWV.879 in E minor
11. BWV.880 in F major

60'

Interval

12. BWV.881 in F minor
13. BWV.882 in F sharp major
14. BWV.883 in F sharp minor
15. BWV.884 in G major
16. BWV.885 in G minor
17. BWV.886 in A flat major
18. BWV.887 in G sharp minor
19. BWV.888 in A major
20. BWV.889 in A minor
21. BWV.890 in B flat major
22. BWV.891 in B flat minor
23. BWV.892 in B major
24. BWV.893 in B minor

60'

Performer

Pierre-Laurent Aimard *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

'How strange, how new, how beautiful were his ideas in improvising. How perfectly he realised them! All his fingers were equally skilful; all were capable of the most perfect accuracy in performance.' As his obituary tells us, few could match JS Bach's facility for inventing musical ideas at the keyboard, both spontaneously and as part of the compositional process. He wrote music in every keyboard form in currency at the time, extending the parameters of each beyond anything that had been achieved before.

Both volumes of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* comprise 24 pieces each: pairs of preludes and fugues in every available key, composed partly to demonstrate 'well-tempered' tuning (not quite 'equal temperament', as is sometimes claimed) – in which relatively uniform tuning communicated the system of major and minor keys more reliably than the earlier system called 'meantone temperament'.

Bach composed Book Two between 1738 or 1739 and 1742 – about 20 years after Book One. It was written during a purple patch in Bach's keyboard output, even for him: at around this time he also wrote the *Clavier-Übungen Part 3* and the *Goldberg Variations*, and worked on *The Art of Fugue* (the Book Two pieces composed last were written on the same type of paper used for *The Art of Fugue*). Book Two of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, like these works, demonstrates Bach's love of old and new styles from France, Italy and his homeland of Germany.

This second volume may also show us, subtly, Bach's stubborn side. He had endured criticism of his densely knotted contrapuntal style, so this collection may partly have been a gesture of defiance, emphasising his ability to combine fashionable modern idioms with his trademark aesthetic – rather as he would later pointedly answer a 'test' set by Frederick the Great with the outrageously brilliant musical riposte, *The Musical Offering*. In Book Two, Bach similarly shows off his range, from the elegant lighter style represented by the Prelude No.12, to the rich textural complexity of the Fugues Nos.22 and 23.

Each prelude is followed by a fugue in the same key, starting with C major, then C minor, then ascending chromatically (C sharp, then D and so on, up and up). But the paired pieces are

not necessarily related to one another thematically, as some were transposed from earlier works in different keys. Bach loved to recycle, and at least 11 pieces of the 48 contained in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* existed in earlier incarnations.

This practicality was all part and parcel of Bach's role as a teacher. He wrote compositions specifically designed to enhance the technique of his students – he had little time for theory separate from practice, so rather than writing in words how a student might excel, he chose instead to provide practical solutions. In 1790, Ernst Ludwig Gerber wrote a retrospective account of his father, Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, who had been a 22-year-old student of Bach. According to this account, the composer had promised to give Heinrich 'the instruction he desired and asked at once whether he had industriously played fugues. At the first lesson he set his Inventions before him. When he had studied these through to Bach's satisfaction, there followed a series of suites, then *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.'

What a series of lessons this must have been – a baptism of fire. Imagine, as a student of university age, working your way towards what has since been recognised as a pinnacle of Western music. What's more, Bach also encouraged his pupils to write out pieces from Book Two as part of their studies – resulting in a complex patchwork of sources. One such student was JF Agricola, who in 1738 copied out early versions of several Book Two fugues. In the process, he shows us that this volume evolved out of existing teaching materials into a compendium that was formalised later. So Bach doesn't seem to have planned this second book as such; it came into being through practical necessity – and from the sheer wealth of his ideas. A definitive version of Book Two is therefore almost impossible to pin down. Bach kept refining it, treating it more as an organic, evolving resource than an immovable marble edifice.

Many of the preludes in Book Two are more expansive than those of Book One, and the later volume also reveals an even more thorough integration of European traditions, with Bach creating cosmopolitan combinations such as Italian styles mixed into French dances. And while many of the forms heard in Book One are carried over, they are fewer and further between. By the time Bach was writing Book Two, the popularity of the formal, complex fugue had waned – so he rejuvenated it with popular dance rhythms, such as in the Fugue No.12, a brisk bourrée; No.13, an agile gavotte; and No.21, a lilting minuet. In contrast with the gravitas of the final fugue in Book One, Book Two's final Fugue, No.24, is all sweetness and light.

Even so, the antique grandeur of the Fugue No.9 shows that Bach had by no means lost touch with earlier precedents, and this piece is also an example of his drawing on earlier sources in

Book Two, alongside some subtle, possibly even subconscious, similarities with other works. The Fugue No.9 resembles an earlier fugue – also in E major – by JCF Fischer, from his collection *Ariadne Musica* of 1702, while the subject (main theme) of the Fugue No.19 could well be based on the hymn tune 'Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr'.

Other connections are looser but still apparent: the Fugue No.3 shares its compact alacrity with the Bach cantata *Wachet auf!* (Wake up!), while the wide leaps and emotional depth of the Fugue No.20 recalls the sound-world of the *St Matthew Passion*. The Prelude No.16 resembles the opening of the *St John Passion*, and the Prelude No.22 is evocative of the moment in the *St Matthew Passion* when Jesus cries out 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!' – the text of which refers to Psalm 22, so it is possible that Bach deliberately numbered this prelude 22 on account of this connection. In a similar numeric parallel, there is an argument to suggest that Bach had Psalm 23 in mind when he wrote the Prelude No.23; its tone certainly seems to reflect the pastoral tenderness suggested by those famous words, 'The Lord is my Shepherd'.

This collage of materials – student pieces, transcriptions, adaptations or fresh innovations – could in lesser hands have become unwieldy or incoherent. But somehow, for all the apparent messiness of its genesis, the whole hangs together as though Bach had always planned it this way. And in the process, he created something even more challenging than the first volume; technically more difficult for the performer, and a rich feast for the listener. The Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni, who made numerous transcriptions and editions of Bach's music in the 19th and early 20th centuries, argued that if Book One was for performers, Book Two was for composers. In other words, it is meatier, more complex – but hugely rewarding. And when we attune our ears to the intricate variety of this extraordinary collection, it becomes a sumptuous aural banquet: one delectable course after another.

Programme notes © Joanna Wyld, 2026

Find out more

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