ANGELA HEWITT: BACH ODYSSEY VII

THE WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER, BOOK II
Johann Sebastian Bach (1665-1750)

The year after Johann Sebastian Bach wrote the date 1722 on the title page of his first set of twenty-four preludes and fugues, The Well-Tempered Clavier, he left the court of Anhalt-Cöthen to take up his duties as Kantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. During the next twenty-seven years until his death in 1750, he wrote a breath taking amount of music—mostly sacred and secular cantatas, motets, Masses, Passions, and oratorios. Also from this time date the six keyboard Partitas, the completion of the French Suites, the Clavierübung II and III, the ‘Goldberg’ Variations, another set of twenty-four preludes and fugues and, in the last few years, The Musical Offering and The Art of the Fugue. It is therefore not surprising that he left us with no fair copy of what is now known as Book II of the ‘48’. Time must have been scarce! He also had to direct the Collegium Musicum, train and discipline unruly choir boys, play at weddings and funerals, and deal with the town authorities who were a constant source of annoyance. On top of all that, he and his wife Anna Magdalena added thirteen more children to their family—only six of whom survived infancy.

Bach did, however, leave us a composite manuscript, probably built up between 1739 and 1742. Each prelude and fugue is written out separately on a folded sheet of paper (prelude on one side, fugue on the other to avoid page turns), and several are copied out in Anna Magdalena’s hand. There is no title page, and three of them have been lost. Many corrections and revisions are visible, done at different times. After Bach’s death, this autograph probably went into the hands of his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, and we know that Muzio Clementi owned it in the nineteenth century. In 1896 it was acquired by the
British Museum, where it remains today.

It would be easy if the story ended there. It does not. Bach continued to make revisions in copies belonging to his pupils right up until 1748—perhaps never giving us his final thoughts on the subject. The most important of these sources is the complete manuscript in the hand of Johann Christoph Altnickol (1719–1759) who became Bach's son-in-law in 1749. It is dated 1744 and bears the title page:

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Second Part, consisting of Preludes and Fugues through all the Tones and Semitones, written by Johann Sebastian Bach, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, Capellmeister and Directore Chori Musici in Leipzig.

After Bach's death, individual preludes and fugues were published in various theoretical treatises, but it wasn't until 1801/2 that not one but three complete editions of the '48' appeared. In the case of Book II, however, none was based on the British Library autograph which was then unknown. We have had to wait until the 1990s for editions to appear that take into account all of the available sources (the new Associated Board edited by Richard Jones, and the Neue Bach-Ausgabe edited by Alfred Dürr). The first English edition (a copy of which was passed down to me through my father's family) was done by Samuel Wesley and C F Horn, and published in instalments between 1810 and 1813 (with a different price for subscribers and non-subscribers). In their introduction, Wesley and Horn make the following claim:

The 48 Preludes and Fugues, the first 12 of which are here presented to the Musical World (in a more correct manner than they have ever yet appeared, even in the Country where they were constructed) have always been regarded by the most scientific among scientific Musicians, (the Germans) as matchless Productions.

They give detailed recommendations on how to study them (slow practise, beginning with the less complicated ones), even advising the avoidance at first of those in C sharp major, E flat minor, and F minor 'because they are set in Keys less in Use in England than upon the Continent, and therefore are at first puzzling'. Myriad signs are used in the text to mark each entry of the subject, its inversions, augmentations, and diminutions.

This complex history of Book II is the reason why so many variants appear in the editions we now have. In the end, of course, that is not the most important thing (bringing Bach's music alive should be uppermost in the mind of the interpreter) but it is fascinating to see how his musical imagination was constantly seeking to embellish and improve. Indeed, several of the pieces survive in early versions probably dating from the 1720s and '30s. For their inclusion in The Well-Tempered Clavier II they underwent extensive revisions, enlargements, and often transpositions.

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