

BACH *Well-Tempered Clavier* (complete) • András Schiff (pn) • ECM 001733702
(4 CDs: 246:23)

András Schiff is an old hand at Bach, having recorded most of the composer's major solo and concerted keyboard works, including a previous *WTC* for Decca back in the 1980s. Over the course of reviewing numerous artists performing Bach's keyboard works on piano, I've consistently cited András Schiff, along with Angela Hewitt and Craig Sheppard, as my touchstones in this repertoire. So a new complete *WTC* from Schiff aroused great expectations, which, happily, were not disappointed.

Many artists, on returning to a work essayed 25 years earlier, would mellow their approach and slow their tempos, but Schiff isn't having any of that. It's clear from these new readings that he has thoroughly rethought Bach's 48 preludes and fugues and now presents them faster and with sharper rhythmic pointing than previously. Instead of plastering the page with comparative timings between the old and new versions for all 48 preludes and fugues, let me just display an abbreviated table of the very few exceptions where the timings for Schiff II are either slower than, or identical to, Schiff I:

Book I Schiff I Schiff II

E Minor 3:18 3:18

F#-Minor 3:52 3:53

Book II

C Minor 4:33 4:43

C#-Minor 5:56 5:56

F Minor 5:54 5:54

B^b-Major 8:58 9:27

That's it. In only three of the six numbers, identified in bold, is Schiff II slower than Schiff I, in one case by just one second, in another by 10 seconds, and in the third by a more pronounced 29 seconds. In the other three non-bolded numbers, Schiff II is unchanged from Schiff I. That leaves 42 out of 48 preludes and fugues, all of which—I repeat, *all* of them—are now faster, and in some cases astonishingly so. For example, Schiff I took 6:17 for the Prelude and Fugue in B^b-Minor from Book I; Schiff II now takes 5:25, an acceleration of 42 seconds. Even more stunning is the speedup in the Prelude and Fugue in E Minor from Book II—Schiff I, 7: 03; Schiff II, 5:48, a difference of 1:15.

But it's not merely that Schiff is more animated in his new version, he's also more open to spontaneity and to the playfulness that distinguishes Angela Hewitt's Bach. Any complaints that Schiff's Decca *WTC* was stiff and cautious can now be laid to rest. The pianist's long experience with Bach seems to have loosened his former reserve while at the same time tightening his technical command. It's as if Schiff's confidence and comfort level have reached the point where he finally feels

at ease in addressing Bach with the familiar German *Du* instead of the more formal *Sie*.

Some may seek the greater sense of ennoblement that comes from lingering over the concluding B-Minor Prelude and Fugue from Book I, but we should not forget that these are pieces written to demonstrate a pragmatic technical point. They are not spiritual meditations in the manner of Bach's chorale preludes, and dwelling on the slow numbers in an effort to make them sound deeply devotional can have the opposite effect, making them instead sound self-indulgent and pretentious. Schiff strikes just the right balance, giving the slow-paced preludes and fugues their due while resisting affectation. Schiff's fast-paced movements are brisk and rhythmically smart, with the left hand engaging the right equally in contrapuntal play while always bringing out the fundamental bass notes that underpin the harmonic framework. Of the many available piano versions of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, András Schiff's latest is definitely a top choice. Strongly recommended.

Jerry Dubins

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Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750) - MusicWeb Review

The Well-Tempered Clavier Books 1 and 2

Preludes and Fugues BWV 846-869

András Schiff (piano)

rec. August 2011, Auditorio Radiotelevisione svizzera, Lugano.

ECM NEW SERIES 2270-73 (4764827) [4 CDs: 51:36 + 53:34 + 66:05 + 72:47]

András Schiff recorded most of Bach's keyboard works in the 1980s, and has recently made a number of new recordings for ECM. This boxed set of the two books of the Well-Tempered Clavier is his latest such release, and shows Schiff as a much more mature pianist. Making a point of using the pedal as little as possible, Schiff delineates all the contrapuntal lines in the fugues carefully, and plays the preludes with zest and brio. In some ways, Schiff adopts a Gouldian approach here; hardly any legato, and very percussive.

On the other hand, Schiff doesn't fall into Gould's excesses. He presents each prelude and fugue as a carefully polished gem. Not using the sustaining pedal helps give the impression of separation between notes - as one hears more on a harpsichord. This serves to bring out the rhythms of the pieces. His ornamentation is subtle and limited, but one gets the feeling that it is just right.

Over time, listening through these four discs, I found that Schiff's style - which at first seemed just a bit jarring - made more and more sense. The music here can be

lively or pensive, and Schiff takes on all of its moods and provides an approach that stands on its own. Comparing it with pianists who use the pedal shows a very large difference, but comparing it with harpsichord recordings offers more similarities than differences; this in spite of the very different sounds of the instruments.

The recording is excellent; the piano sounds rich and full, with no reverb to mar the detail or to drown out the subtleties of the counterpoint.

This is a fine recording of Bach's great preludes and fugues - one that even those hesitant to listen to the work on a modern piano should seek out.

Kirk McElhearn

Bach: Das Wohltemperierte Clavier Review by Blair Sanderson

AllMusic Rating: 5*/5*

András Schiff recorded his first set of **J.S. Bach**'s Well-Tempered Clavier for London in the mid-1980s, but the passage of time, personal reflection, and improvements in digital recording have contributed to making his second recording of "The 48" a necessity, this time on ECM New Series. As eloquent as ever, and always meticulous in execution, Schiff plays the two books of preludes and fugues without use of the piano's pedals, so his touch and control are evident in every note and in the interplay of lines, which are cleanly separated. The transparent recording, which is de rigueur for ECM, is a great aid in conveying Schiff's scrupulous playing, so the music almost seems to exist in its own pristine, abstract realm, without the botherments of background noises or sounds of physical exertion. However, there is an ideal amount of resonance in the studio space that heightens the timbres of the piano without blurring the music, so Schiff doesn't perform in a vacuum. The earlier recordings garnered high praise from critics and Schiff's many admirers, so this exceptional presentation is sure to win him a new and well-deserved audience. Highly recommended.

BBC Mag - Best recording of JS Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier András Schiff (piano) (2012) ECM New Series 476 4827

András Schiff's two versions of the '48' remain timeless classics. The first, a Decca recording from the 1980s, is poised and lyrical, if occasionally verging on the self-indulgent; the later, 2012 version on ECM would be my desert island choice. Schiff's mature vision is more abstract, less sentimental: as such, we hear Bach's music distilled to its essence, rather than the pianist's personality.

Informed by the spikier sound of the harpsichord, Schiff avoids the temptation to smudge [Bach](#)'s textures with the piano's sustaining pedal. Instead, thanks to his impeccable technique and instinctive grasp of the music's architecture, he floats the sound, spinning *cantabile* melodies with the fingers alone (and with a little help from ECM's glossy recording). Contrapuntal lines are sharply etched, so that even the most highly wrought fugues sound transparent as cut glass.

Schiff is unrivalled in his ability to delineate voice parts with subtle weighting and a conversational interplay that ranges from spirited repartee to reflective discourse. Discernible, too, is his synaesthetic perception of keys: A minor he sees 'as red as blood'; D major as brassy gold; C major is the white of innocence; B minor is black, the colour of death. These readings span the gamut of human experience, from the exuberance of youth to the introspection of old age.

Bach: The Well-Tempered Clavier - Guardian Review

András Schiff (ECM) - Andrew Clements Rating:4*/5*

[András Schiff](#) has recorded the 48 Preludes and Fugues that make up [The Well-Tempered Clavier](#) before, in the mid-80s as part of his complete survey of Bach's keyboard music for Decca. Over the quarter century since, his playing has inevitably evolved, deepening and maturing, while losing many of the expressive mannerisms that often seemed self-conscious and contrived, and sometimes disrupted its natural poise.

What has remained constant, though, has been the sense of enquiry and discovery that Schiff brings to all his interpretations, the deep thought that invariably lies behind them. The sleeve notes for this ECM set include an essay in which he discusses the use (or, more accurately, the non-use) of the sustaining pedal when playing the 48 on a modern concert grand. He argues that none of the keyboard instruments available to Bach had such a device, and that therefore its use in a performance today needs to be strictly rationed: "Clarity is essential with Bach," he writes, "The purity of counterpoint and voice-leading must be self-evident, never muffled or confused. Thus a discreet use of the pedal is not forbidden as long as these rules are observed."

Certainly the clean, limpid textures of these performances are one of their most striking characteristics. Another is the sense of rightness about almost every tempo that Schiff adopts; nothing seems hurried or laboured, so that the tone of each prelude seems perfectly judged and fugues unfold naturally, with every voice given its own distinctive colouring and the space it needs. Just occasionally you do long for a bit of eccentricity, for an interpretation that takes you unawares, but really the playing is so immaculate and projects such authority that it seems churlish to want it step out of its carefully thought-out character.

Johann Sebastian Bach - ECM Reviews

András Schiff piano - Well Tempered Clavier (Bks. I & II)

Recorded August 2011, Auditorio Radiotelevisione svizzera, Lugano

Engineer: Stephan Schellmann

Produced by Manfred Eicher

Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-tempered Clavier* is more than a magnum opus. It's an origin story. Practically speaking, it houses a prelude-fugue couplet for each of the 24 major and minor keys, twice over. Dated 1722 and 1742 respectively, Books I and II are the subjects of two earlier ECM New Series recordings by Keith Jarrett, while pianist Till Fellner has lent his shadows to Book I. Jarrett made the bold decision to record Book I on piano and Book II on harpsichord, thereby giving discernible substance to the two decades that separate them. Fellner's poignant rendition is only half completed, and it remains to be seen whether the rest will reach market. Until then, label devotees have another.

In his marvelous liner notes, Paul Griffiths characterizes the WTC as "one of the central thoroughfares of western music." He goes on to speak of prelude and fugue as gate and path or, another way, "Things in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* always come in pairs, but pairs that, unlike butterfly wings, display an essential asymmetry, if an asymmetry that will sound inevitable, even natural." Doubtless, this asymmetry is inevitable, for it is the pollen that keeps Bach's fields fragrant. As a renowned veteran of the composer, András Schiff dusts decades of return into these flora. For him the question is not whether to approach them as studio recording or as performance, because for him the two are inseparable. "To me, Bach's music is not black and white; it's full of colors," he asserts. As in the cover art by Jan Jedlička, the music crosses lines in a deepening network of variation. Schiff concludes his portion of the booklet with a note on pedal use—or, in his case, total lack thereof. The music is all the freer for it, the affectation a potent expressive tool. Like a digital photographer reverting to manual, Schiff's process gives vision to its subject with meticulous care. Whether or not this creates a "purer" sound is entirely subjective, though one can hardly fault the sincerity of his choice, for indeed the pedal is often fantasy's servant. In its place is a tasteful reverb, lacquered at Lugano's Auditorio Radiotelevisione svizzera under the watch of engineer Stephan Schellmann.

Eschewment of pedal shortens the distance between attack and delay, making it more akin to human speech. Already, in the C major Prelude of Book I, we feel a linguistic touch speaking through those famous arpeggios as Schiff makes of the piano a syllabic organ, no mere percussive machine. His ability to distinguish palatal colors becomes further apparent in the A-flat major Prelude. Schiff's hands-only approach lends pop and shine to the faster movements, and to the slower adds emotional weight. It also makes the rhythmic complexities glow. Whether the playful grinds of the C minor and C-sharp minor Fugues or the

balance of taste and virtuosity of the D major Prelude, the relationship between medium and message becomes, again, inevitable the more one listens.

Perhaps most illuminating in this regard is the equal partnership of the left and right hands. Listen, for instance, to Schiff's handling of the C-sharp minor Fugue ground, which folds words into sentences and sentences into stories, or the coalescence achieved in his E minor Prelude. From epic carriage to dulcet tickling, such nuances sweep the landscape free of its weeds. Other moments, like the F-sharp major Prelude, are the espresso in a latte universe. Also noteworthy are the extended trills, which Schiff varies to suit the mood at hand. Twirling like maple propellers at one moment (G minor Prelude) and methodically slow the next (F-sharp minor Fugue), they hold us captive at any speed.

Brilliant execution of the C major Prelude and C-sharp minor Fugue stand out in Book II, sounding at least like three hands. The sheer volume of intimacy in the D-sharp minor Prelude draws a comparable spiral of creative focus, and the famous F minor Prelude enchants, ghostly but tangible. The F-sharp major Prelude is yet another notable. This Schiff manages beautifully, shifting with perfect pacing between the dotted eighth-sixteenth couplets and moving into strings of sixteenths in this 3/4 piece. Likewise, his downward chromatic steps in the A minor Prelude are intuitively realized. The final Prelude and Fugue in B minor scintillate with new beginnings and good tidings. Thus, Schiff has locked us into Bach's prism (especially in the E minor Prelude of Book II) with the precision of a Spirograph wheel and has held us there until the design can no longer repeat itself.

Happiness theorists believe that we become habituated to surpluses of pleasure or positive stimulation, to the point where even the most meaningful activities lose the value they once held. Bach's WTC noshes on time with the same measured reflection that the iconic shepherd chews on his wheat stalk. In that idle motion is a world of temperament whose secrets will never be fully disclosed. Listening to this music today, it is easy to imagine how different our world is from the time in which it was written. The beauty of Schiff's performance and Bach's insightful writing is that, despite the potential infinitude of performances the score invites, at its heart is a survival instinct that will never falter so long as life walks this earth.