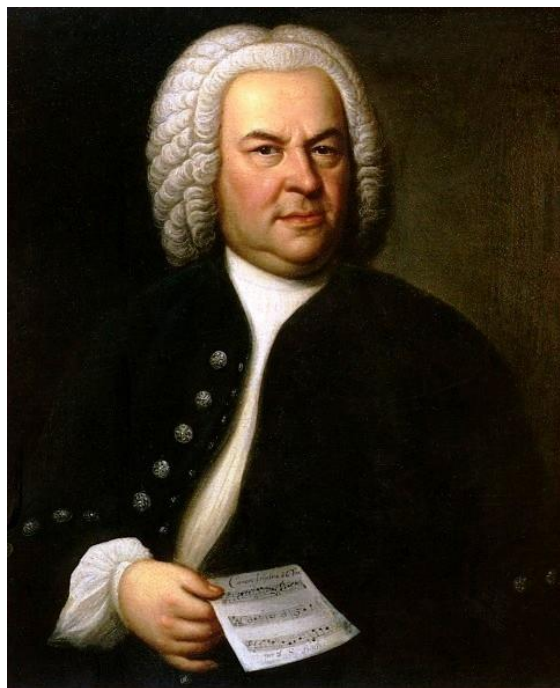


J S Bach, the Well-Tempered Klavier, Book 2 and Michael Houstoun

By Joy Aberdein, Editor of *Ritmico*



J S Bach
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“How strange, how new, how expressive, how beautiful were his ideas in improvising! How perfectly he realised them! All his fingers were equally skilful; all were equally capable of the most perfect accuracy in performance. He had devised for himself so convenient a system of fingering that it was not hard for him to conquer the greatest difficulties with the most flowing facility.”

Anecdotal evidence in Bach's obituary, co-written by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-88) and Bach's pupil Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720-74). Musikalische Bibliothek, Lorenz Mizler (1754)

On a late Sunday afternoon in August, Te Koki New Zealand School of Music and IRMTNZ introduced the first of four concerts in the Judith Clark Memorial Piano Series. In the sold-out Adam Concert Room, Michael Houstoun performed and shared an astonishing three hours-plus of the 24 Preludes and Fugues of Book 2 by J S Bach. As well as exceptional musicianship, the intellectual, emotional and physical stamina called for is phenomenal.

Played in four sections of six, with breaks between, audience concentration was also intense, informed by Housoun's insightful apt titles at the end of each movement. The rewards for those present were rare and special.

*The Well-Tempered Klavier*¹ comprises two volumes of 24 Preludes and Fugues, each working in sequence through the 12 major and minor keys. Unequaled in their inventiveness, these were the first systematic exploration of harmony, intended as a textbook on keyboard playing and composition. Composed for performance on the soft-toned clavichord or fuller-toned harpsichord, they graduated successfully to the modern piano. They use devices such as inversion and augmentation to produce textures that vary from a one-time melody to a rich musical fabric where it can be difficult to discern the individual voices. There are also dance-like passages, strong and lyrical melodies and challenging rhythms. The preludes that lead into each fugue have been described as models for the later poetic Op. 28 Preludes of Chopin.

¹ “Well Tempered” refers to the equidistant tuning of the 12 semitones in the chromatic scale. (A keyboard tuned to strict mathematical principles rather than by ear, would result in scales that sound out of tune.)