

# Plush 11 ~ Piano Recital

## Sir András Schiff

Tuesday 5 September 2017 ~ 7.30pm

**J. S. Bach**

Well-Tempered Clavier - Book I

(1hr 50mins)

# Programme Notes

## J. S. Bach: Well-Tempered Clavier / Book 1

Notes provided by the Vancouver Recital Society

One of the monumental landmarks in the history of music, Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier has come to represent the "Old Testament" of the pianist's repertory (Hans von Bülow) and his "daily bread" (Robert Schumann). For more than 250 years, it has trained the fingers of innumerable keyboard players, and has also trained the judgment of composers seeking to understand the complex relationship between creative freedom and formal discipline.

The two books of preludes and fugues in alternately major and minor keys - twenty-four in each - were not written in sequence or as a single concerted effort. They occupied Bach across most of his creative life, from his late twenties to about sixty. He completed Book I in 1722 and Book II a generation later in 1742. The significance of the title lies in Bach's intent to prove the practicality of adopting a new system of tuning the clavier (a generic term for keyboard instruments at the time, but referring mostly to the harpsichord), namely by means of artificially dividing the scale into twelve equal semitones, hence overriding its natural acoustic divisions into unequal semitones which produced severe problems of intonation.

A prelude can mean so many things that a single definition is impossible. As found in the WTC, each prelude is a free, improvisatory piece that examines from various angles a figuration, texture, melodic motif, rhythmic idea or some combination of these in a continuously unfolding musical discourse.

A fugue is a somewhat more complex matter. The fugue's "subject" is announced in the opening bars in one of the fugue's three or four voices (on rare occasions, two or even five voices are found). This subject is then stated in a second voice while the first continues with a "countersubject". Succeeding voices are treated similarly, quickly establishing a dense contrapuntal web which continues for the duration of the fugue. Often near the end, but also

at various points along the way, the composer might use the technique of "stretto," in which the subject makes overlapping entries in each voice in quick succession. Additionally, the subject may be inverted (turned upside down), augmented (played twice or four times as slowly), or diminished (played at double or quadruple speed) at any point following its initial presentation.

The listener's interest in a fugue lies both in following the composer's continuous manipulation of the subject and in observing the grand design of the whole. Abbé Georg Joseph Vogler (a contemporary of Mozart) made this succinct observation: "The fugue is a conversation... a musical artwork where no one accompanies, no one submits, where no one plays a secondary role, but each a principal part."

The Prelude and Fugue in C major, the portal through which we enter the Well-Tempered Clavier, is technically extremely simple. Amateur pianists who can play nothing else from the piece can play this prelude. It is seemingly nothing more than a series of gently rippled broken chords. It is "fine-spun like a spider's web" (Cecil Gray), yet written in full-textured, five-part harmony throughout. The first great Bach scholar, Philipp Spitta, called this prelude "a piece of indescribable fascination, in which a grand and beatific melody seems to float past like the song of an angel heard in the silence of night through the murmur of trees, groves and waters."

In contrast to the simplicity of the first prelude, the first fugue is one of the most intricate, tightly woven and masterfully constructed. There is no countersubject. Instead, Bach indulges in extensive stretto, using it not just at the end but also throughout the entire fugue, starting as early as the seventh bar. Only a composer (or a frustrated student) can fully appreciate just how difficult it is to fit together all the elements of a proper stretto while maintaining a continuously flowing melodic line and avoiding tedium.

At the other end of our traversal, for the final Prelude and Fugue in B minor, we would expect Bach to produce something truly exceptional, and

he does not disappoint us. The prelude moves inexorably forward like a huge musical juggernaut. In form it is unique in the First Book, with each of its two sections delineated with repeat signs (not always observed in performance) in the manner common to a movement from a suite. Also unique are the performance directions. The manuscript score contains tempo indications (Andante for the prelude, Largo for the fugue) for this pair alone. The fugue is the longest in the entire First Book. Its subject is remarkable for containing every one of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, thus forming a fitting conclusion to a collection of pieces whose avowed intent is to demonstrate the validity of each of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. How Bach weaves the fierce power of his subject into a continuously fascinating, 75-bar tapestry of mesmerising force is one of the miracles of Baroque music.

#### **Sir Andras Schiff writes the following on performing Bach:**

Playing J. S. Bach's keyboard music on the modern piano, pianists are confronted with various fundamental questions. The answers to these are never simple. For example: what is the "correct" instrument for the Well-Tempered Clavier? The clavichord, the harpsichord, the organ, the pedal-harpsichord? Is it permitted to play Bach on an instrument that he couldn't have known? If it isn't, whose permission do we need to ask?

What is the right tempo and character for a particular prelude or fugue and how do we find it? How wide is the dynamic range in this music and does this vary from instrument to instrument or from venue to venue?

How do we phrase or articulate a certain passage or a fugal subject? Is there need for more ornamentation? For less? For none? Which edition is the best one?

Each of these questions – and many more – needs to be asked and thought about. Answering them convincingly requires experience, intelligence and – to quote Andras C.P.E.Bach – "buon gusto", good taste. Decisions need

to be made and it takes courage to say: this is the way I want to play this piece, knowing that it will not be to everyone's liking.

One of the biggest problems is the sustaining pedal, and not just in Bach. This ingenious device enables the player to raise the dampers from the strings, allowing them to vibrate freely with any notes being played. Beethoven was the first great composer who specifically asked for its application. In his c-sharp minor sonata Op.27 Nr. 2 the entire first movement is to be played "senza sordini", with raised dampers (with pedal).

The effect is magical, the harmonies are washed together, creating sonorities that are truly revolutionary.

It would be reasonable to assume that pianists would follow what the composer had asked for; after all Beethoven was quite a decent musician and he certainly knew what he wanted. Wishful thinking, since in fact ninety-nine per cent of them fully ignore the creator's instructions and diligently change the pedal at every change of harmony. WHY? Because, they argue, this effect would have sounded different on Beethoven's fortepiano than it does on its modern successor. Have these people played on Beethoven's Broadwood? No, they certainly haven't but they pretend to know. Well, I beg to differ because I've played and recorded on it. The sound, the volume and the mechanics may be different but the actual musical idea is exactly the same. A dissonance remains a dissonance, regardless of the instrument.

What does all this have to do with Bach? Quite a lot. The sustaining pedal was not at his disposal on any of the keyboard instruments of his time. That means that the pieces that he wrote could be played without the use of the pedal which didn't exist. Consequently, the very same works can also be played on the modern piano, with eight fingers, two thumbs and no feet. (The one exception is the A-minor fugue in Book 1 of the WTC; its final bars can't be played with two hands alone, this being a composition for the organ. Here the use of the sostenuto pedal – the middle one of the three – is advisable.)

Does this mean that we have to disregard this “crown jewel” of the instrument when playing Bach? Not necessarily.

It can be used intelligently and discreetly to assist the lack of sonority, especially in venues with dry acoustics. However, let’s not underestimate the danger of damage that can be caused by indiscriminate use of the pedal. The piano is not an automobile, where the right foot is permanently on the accelerator pedal. When string players (and singers) use vibrato all the time, on every note, it’s unbearable to listen to. The pedal is to the piano as the vibrato is to string players. Both must be applied with care, control and in moderation.

Clarity is essential with Bach, 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. The question remains whether it is beneficial to the music to look for easier solutions. A perfect legato on the piano is an impossibility and one can only create an illusion of achieving it.

To attempt this with the hands alone is much more difficult but it’s well worth trying. Bach certainly didn’t want his music to sound easy, it’s demanding for players and listeners alike.

An eminent pianist colleague of mine recently reprimanded me for my “abstinence”. His argument was that all the great pianists of the past have played Bach with lots of pedal and we must follow their example. To me this reasoning is not very convincing. The late George Malcolm, a great musician, best known as a harpsichordist, taught me to play Bach without pedal and to enjoy the delights of purity.

Once a successful young virtuoso pianist came to him asking if he could play for him Bach’s D-major toccata. Malcolm agreed, the young man took his place at the keyboard, put his right foot on the pedal, raised his arms, and here Malcolm suddenly exclaimed: “Stop!” “But I haven’t played a note yet!” said the victim. “No, but you were just about going to.”

To me, Bach’s music is not black and white; it’s full of colours. In my imagination each tonality corresponds to a colour. The WTC with its 24 preludes and fugues in all the major and minor keys provides an ideal opportunity for this fanciful fantasy. Let’s imagine that in the beginning there was innocence and therefore C-major (all white keys) is snow-white. The last piece of both books is in b-minor which is the key to death. Compare the fugue of Book 1 to the Kyrie of the b-minor mass. This has to be pitch-black. Between these two poles we have all the other colours, first the yellows, oranges and ochre (between c-minor and d-minor), all the shades of blue (E-flat major to e-minor), the greens (F-major to g-minor), pinks and reds (A-flat major to a-minor), browns (B-flat), grey (B-major) and finally black.

Of course this is a very personal interpretation and each of you may have a different opinion. Nevertheless if some of us happen to believe that music is more than just a series of notes and sounds, then a little bit of fantasy is welcome.

**Andras Schiff**  
**Firenze, May 2012**

## Sir András Schiff Piano



Sir András Schiff was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1953 and started piano lessons at the age of five with Elisabeth Vadász. Subsequently he continued his studies at the Franz Liszt Academy with Professor Pál Kadosa, György Kurtág and Ferenc Rados, and later in London with George Malcolm.

Recitals and special cycles, including the major keyboard works of J.S. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann and Bartók form an important part of his activities. Since 2004 he has performed complete cycles of the 32 Beethoven Sonatas worldwide and the cycle in the Tonhalle Zurich was recorded live for ECM Records.

An exclusive ECM recording Artist, his recordings of works by Schubert, Schumann, Janáček, Beethoven and Bach, have been released to the highest of critical acclaim. The most recent disc, "Encores after Beethoven" was released in 2016: a collection of encores performed after his Beethoven Cycle programs. His newest recording, to be released in October, includes sonatas for violin and piano by Bach, Busoni, and Beethoven with violinist Yuuko Shiokawa.

Sir András has worked with most major international orchestras and conductors, but in recent years has performed mainly as a conductor and soloist. In 1999 he created his own chamber orchestra, the Cappella Andrea Barca, which consists of international soloists, chamber musicians and friends. In addition to international tours with this orchestra, he works with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. He appears as conductor and soloist with the New York Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony this season, in addition to over a dozen recitals in two North American visits.

His other concert performances bring him to Europe, Australia, Japan, China, and South America. His projects and cycles can be heard in musical centers around the world.

Since childhood he has enjoyed playing chamber music and from 1989-1998 was Artistic Director of the internationally highly praised "Musiktage Mondsee" chamber music festival near Salzburg. In 1995, together with Heinz Holliger, he founded the "Ittinger Pfingstkonzerte" in Koartause Ittingen, Switzerland. In 1998 Sir András started a similar series, entitled "Homage to Palladio" at the Teatro Olimpico in Vienza. He has been, Pianist in Residence of the Berlin Philharmonic, a Perspective Artist at Carnegie Hall, and Pianist in Residence of the Kunstfest Weimar.

Sir András has been awarded numerous international prizes. In 2006 he became an Honorary Member of the Beethoven House in Bonn in recognition of his interpretations of Beethoven's works; in 2008 he was awarded the Wigmore Hall Medal in appreciation of 30 years of music-making at Wigmore Hall; ; in 2009 he was made a Special Supernumerary Fellow of Balliol College (Oxford, UK); in 2011 he received the Schumann Prize, the Golden Mozart-Medaille by the International Stiftung Mozarteum, the Order pour le merite for Sciences and Arts, the Grosse Verdienstkreuz mit Stern der Bunderepublik Deutschland, and was made a Member of the Honoru of Vienna Konzarthaus; he was given the Royal Philharmonic Society's Gold Medal; in July 2014 he was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Music honoris causa by the University of Leeds.

In the spring of 2011, Sir András attracted attention because of his opposition to the alarming political development in Hungary and in view of the ensuing attacks on him from some Hungarian Nationalists, decided not to perform again in his home country.

In June 2014 he was bestowed a Knighthood for services to Music in the Queen's Birthday Honours List.

Sir András Schiff's book, "Musik kommt aus der Stille", essays and conversations with Martin Meyer, was published in March 2017 by Bärenreiter and Henschel.



## HISTORY

Founded in 1995, Plush Festival is a summer concert series of classical and contemporary music run by the Brendel family.

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Since 2013 the festival has been running an annual education project connecting aspiring young players in Dorset with visiting musicians.

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