

Dynamics, Tempo, and Ornamentation and Articulation:
J. S. Bach: *Well Tempered Clavier Book I:*
Prelude No. 2 in C Minor BWV 847

Janae Henry
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Bach is one of the most renowned composers of the Baroque period, but his works are some of the most challenging to play. He wrote many pieces, some of which included concertos, inventions, preludes, and fugues, but these pieces don't include details such as dynamics, tempo marking, ornamentation, and articulation. They can be confusing to know how to play it in a way that Bach would, with this lack of detail. Bach's pieces not only left out certain instructions, but they were also written for the keyboards of his day: such as the clavichord and harpsichord, which are different from the modern day piano. The keyboards of Bach's day had more light but efficient actions. When this was put together with a quick attack and release, then there was a precise control over articulation and ornaments.¹ The notes didn't sustain as long, which allowed for more articulation and a lighter sound. The modern-day piano sustains longer and isn't as light to the touch. How then are his pieces to be played, if they were not only performed on different keyboard instruments, but also lacked instructions on how to play them?

One of Bach's most well-known works were the *Well Tempered Clavier* books. *Well-Tempered* didn't refer to a specific tuning, and *Clavier* didn't refer to a specific instrument. It simply meant that you could play "tolerably" in all keys, or as equal temperament.² Once the keyboard was tuned in a way that made all the keys sound "tolerable", Bach wrote two preludes and fugues for each major and minor key, making forty-eight preludes and fugues in total. These pieces have been looked at by researchers who have given insights on how these preludes and fugues should be performed. The Prelude in C Minor from the *Well-Tempered Clavier Book I*, can be looked at in detail on how it can be performed in regards to the dynamics, tempo, ornamentation, and articulation. The dynamics should follow the direction of the pitches-whether rising or falling. The tempo should be set by comparing it to the tempos around it. The ornamentation of the mordents should be neighbor notes and rolls should be played similarly to each other. The articulation should be executed with agile fingers and a detached sound.

First, dynamics should follow the direction of the pitches, whether rising or falling. There are no dynamic markings in Bach's pieces, so it can be a little confusing on how to make it sound musical. The general idea with pitches in Bach's music, is that if the pitch is rising, it typically gets louder, and if the pitch is falling, it usually gets quieter. From mm. 21-24 in Example 1, the pitches generally stay the same in the left hand. In the right hand though, the pitch rises in the beginning note of each measure as shown in Example 1 below. It starts with E, then goes to F#, then G, then A to make an upward scale. According to Siglind Bruhn in his *J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: In-depth Analysis and Interpretation*, he says to play a dynamic of *mp* at m. 21. Then mm. 22-24 at *mf*.³ Here, the dynamics are incrementally getting louder. Mm. 25-27 is different textually, but at the end of the measures, the pitches sequentially rise, which can also be seen in the example below. Bruhn suggests *pf* in m. 25, and 26, with a *f* dynamic in m. 27. *Pf*

¹ David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach*: Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

² David Ledbetter, *Bach's Well-tempered Clavier: The 48 Preludes and Fugues* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 35.

³ Siglind Bruhn, *J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: In-depth Analysis and Interpretation* (Germany: Edition Gorz, 2014), 66.

means *poco forte*, which signifies a little forte, so *pf* is a good transition from *mf* to *f*. Then after m. 27, comes the *Presto* section, and usually when a section is fast, it is typically loud as well. Bruhn suggests a *f* dynamic here, which makes sense because the D at the beginning of the measure, is the highest pitch that has been played in a while, so it is the arriving point. To revisit Example 1 again, the dynamics begin with *mp* at m. 21 with the E, then increasingly gets higher to a *f* at m. 28 with the F.

Bodky comments something similar about the dynamics in relation to the pitches used. In *The Interpretation of Bach's Keyboard Works*, he says that in pieces for harpsichord, the dynamics are nonexistent, but that the “number of sound levels will correspond to the number of terraces to be used.”⁴ This means that when there are different levels of pitches rising or falling, the sound will suddenly shift to a louder or softer dynamic all at once, instead of a gradual change like a crescendo or decrescendo. In the same spot as before, the terraces are found measure by measure. In m. 21, there is the E repeated twice, then up to F in m. 22, G in m. 23, and A in m. 24. It increasingly gets louder with each measure as the notes move upward, similar to what Bruhn suggested above. Only Bodky asks for a more gradual change of dynamic so that it can be *f* at the highpoint in m. 28 instead of reaching *f* sooner by incrementally changing the dynamic at each measure. Either way, the viewpoint is the same in that as the pitches rise or fall, the dynamics should also correspond by getting louder or softer.

EXAMPLE 1: J. S. Bach, WTC Book I, Prelude No. 2 in C Minor, mm. 19-30⁵

⁴ Erwin Bodky, *The Interpretation of Bach's Keyboard Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 89.

⁵ Johann Sebastian Bach, *Well Tempered Clavier Book I: Prelude No. 2 in C Minor BWV 847* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1866), 2.

Second, the tempo should be set by comparing it to the different tempos around it. In the Prelude in C Minor, there are three tempos presented: *presto*, *adagio*, and *allegro* as shown in Example 2 below. There are no tempo markings to begin the piece, but at the end, there are these three tempo markings written in. How should they be played in comparison to each other? They shouldn't be drastically different, but they also should not be super similar in speed. Schulenberg in *The Keyboard Music of J.S. Bach* says that *adagio* could've meant rhythmic freedom. *Presto* usually means pretty fast, but in comparison to *allegro*, there needs to be a difference. *Presto* also shouldn't be considerably fast because of some large leaps that need time to jump to.⁶ So although *presto* and *allegro* both mean to play quickly, there needs to be a difference. *Adagio* is a walking speed, so it is a little easier to differentiate between this speed and the former two.

Bodky adds more information about how to play these speeds: he says that the emphasis was on the effect or mood rather than the actual tempo. So *allegro* means "gay" [or carefree] and *allegro e presto* in comparison to *adagio* indicated gradations of speed.⁷ *Allegro* then needs to be carefree and *adagio* needs to be different from *presto* and *allegro*, which is similar to what Schulenberg says above. Bodky goes on to say that *presto* could get up to 120 beats per measure (bpm) at the quarter note. *Allegro* would be about 100 bpm at the quarter note.⁸ *Allegro* typically means fast, but *Presto* means extremely fast. These suggested tempos would be good to use for these sections.

Bruhn says something similar. He says the *allegro* at the end can be the same speed as the beginning to make it well-rounded. Then he says there could be two interpretations for tempos to use. In the first interpretation, the beginning could start at 72 bpm, followed by *presto* at 144 bpm, *adagio* at 36 bpm, and *allegro* at 72 bpm again (72-144-36-72). The second interpretation could start at 88 bpm, *presto* at 132 bpm, *adagio* at 66 bpm, and *allegro* at 88 bpm (88-132-66-88). In both interpretations, it is inferred that the opening section is *allegro*, as it matches the same tempo found in the *allegro* section. The *adagio* section is considerably slower than the *allegro* and *presto* sections, as usually would be expected. The *presto* sections in both interpretations are faster than the *allegro* tempos, which is also to be expected. The first interpretation is slower than the second one except for the *presto* section that is faster by 12 bpm.

Both of the *presto* sections are suggested to go faster (144, 132 bpm) than the suggested 120 bpm from Bodky. The suggested *allegro* sections are considerably slower (72, 88 bpm) than the 100 bpm Bodky suggested. The tempos that Bodky gave are closer in speed to each other (120, 100 bpm) than the *presto* and *allegro* speeds suggested by Bruhn, which were 72 and 144, or 88 and 132. Which tempos are to be used then? It all depends on preference, but it is good to remember to not have them be too drastically different, or similar to each other. The two tempo speeds from Bodky are more similar in speed to each other than the ones Bruhn suggested, so having a bigger difference between them could be good. Bruhn's second interpretation

⁶ David Schulenberg, 211.

⁷ Erwin Bodky, 102.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

(72-144-36-72) has more movement than his first one, overall being faster. This second interpretation would be the most preferable to use, having clear tempo differences between the pieces, matching each tempo with its range in speed, and having a movement to the piece.

EXAMPLE 2: J. S. Bach, WTC Book I, Prelude No. 2 in C Minor, mm. 28-35

Third, the ornamentation of the mordents and rolls should be played the correct way. Ledbetter says that ornaments are important and have motivic significance. Most writers say that the mordent is happy and cheerful.¹⁰ There is one mordent in m. 34 on the 3rd downbeat. How is it to be played? Schulenberg, in *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* says that over time, Bach's interpretation of how to play the ornamentation changed, and that there isn't one way of doing it.¹¹ He also says that the ornaments aren't just decoration, but create harmonic tension in the music and are "expressive inflections of the melodic line."¹² So the ornaments are an important part in the tension and inflection of the music. They give the music color and there isn't one way to do it.

Bodky says that the non-chord tone of the mordent is always the diatonic neighbor.¹³ The neighbor note is when you move a step up or down from a note and then move back to the original note. In this case, the starting note of the mordent is F, so it would start on F, then it would briefly move to the non-chord tone of E or G, the note right below or above it, and then come back to F before moving on to the rest of the notes in the measure. Like Schulenberg said

⁹ Johann Sebastian Bach, 2.

¹⁰ David Ledbetter, 81.

¹¹ David Schulenberg, 26.

¹² Ibid., 27.

¹³ Erwin Bodky, 170.

above, there isn't one way to play Bach's ornamentation, so moving to either E or G would be a correct way to play the mordent.

The rolls in the *adagio* section also need some instruction on how to be performed. Bruhn says there would be two ways to play it: one would be to play as indicated and the top note would sound like the last note in a broken chord. But in the Baroque style, the broken chord would begin *on* the beat, which meant that the top note would come *after* the beat. He points out that on the second roll, it would mess up the flow to play the ending note after the beat. Instead the bottom and top note of the chord (F and C) could be played together and then the remaining middle notes of the rolled chord could be arpeggiated after. To match with the second chord, the first chord could be rolled in the same way.¹⁴ It's interesting how Bruhn combines the usual way to play a rolled chord, with the Baroque way to make it flow the best. Instead of having the top note be played last, and have the melodic line pause while it waits for that note to be played, the top note can be played with the bottom note, and the rest of the middle notes in the rolled chord can be played after. Then the melodic line can continue in time, and the rolled chord doesn't get in the way of that, but it is still ornamenting the line. The first chord doesn't get in the way of messing up the tempo as much because right before the *adagio* section, the tempo is *presto*, so there would be a little pause switching between the tempos anyways. But to keep it consistent with the second roll, Bruhn suggests executing them the same way, which makes the most sense.

EXAMPLE 3: J. S. Bach, WTC Book I, Prelude No. 2 in C Minor, m. 34 ¹⁵



Fourth, articulation should be executed with agile fingers and a detached sound. Kirkpatrick in *Interpreting Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: A Performer's Discourse of Method* says that the fingers will need to be agile and independent. The hands carry the fingers, and so the fingers are the ones in charge of lifting and depressing the keys. And as there is more independence in the fingers, there is more control over the polyphony.¹⁶ The fingers have a lot of control over the keys and how to play them. The hand gets them to the keys, but then the fingers do the work of pressing the keys. They need to be agile to be able to move over the notes easily to make the music. In this prelude, there are lots of fast sixteenth notes that need agility to be

¹⁴ Siglind Bruhn, 63.

¹⁵ Johann Sebastian Bach, 2.

¹⁶ Ralph Kirkpatrick, *Interpreting Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier: A Performer's Discourse of Method* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1984), 111-112.

able to move over them quickly while still having a good tone. So the fingers are critical in making this process work.

If the fingers are agile and independent, able to flow easily over the notes, how then should the notes be played exactly in terms of articulation? Emanuel Bach, Bach's son said that usually in the eighteenth century, single notes were held for half of their value which implied a non-legato touch. Specialists also say that the early music was more like speech than song.¹⁷ The pieces of the Baroque period often have a detached sound to them. Detached doesn't mean legato, but it doesn't mean staccato either. It's more of an in between where there are slight pauses between each note to separate them, but not coming off each note so quickly that it would be thought of as staccato. As explained here, the notes were held for half value which gave it that detached, or non-legato sound. And it also said it was more like speech. Speech has more inflection, and is broken up, so the musicality of speech wouldn't be constant legato throughout, but instead detached.

In conclusion, Bach is a great composer of the Baroque period. Although he left out some important details on how to perform his pieces, there are specific things in the pieces that can be done to cope without these details. Bach didn't include dynamics, but dynamics can be added according to the rising and falling of the pitches in comparison to each other. There are tempo speeds, but how fast or slow to play each one depends on what comes before and after the tempos so that they can flow better together. The ornamentation of the mordents should be neighbor notes and the rolls should be played similarly to each other. Lastly, the articulation should be executed using agile fingers and a detached sound. Incorporating these suggestions will allow the performer to play Bach's pieces more accurately.

¹⁷ David Schulenberg, 21.

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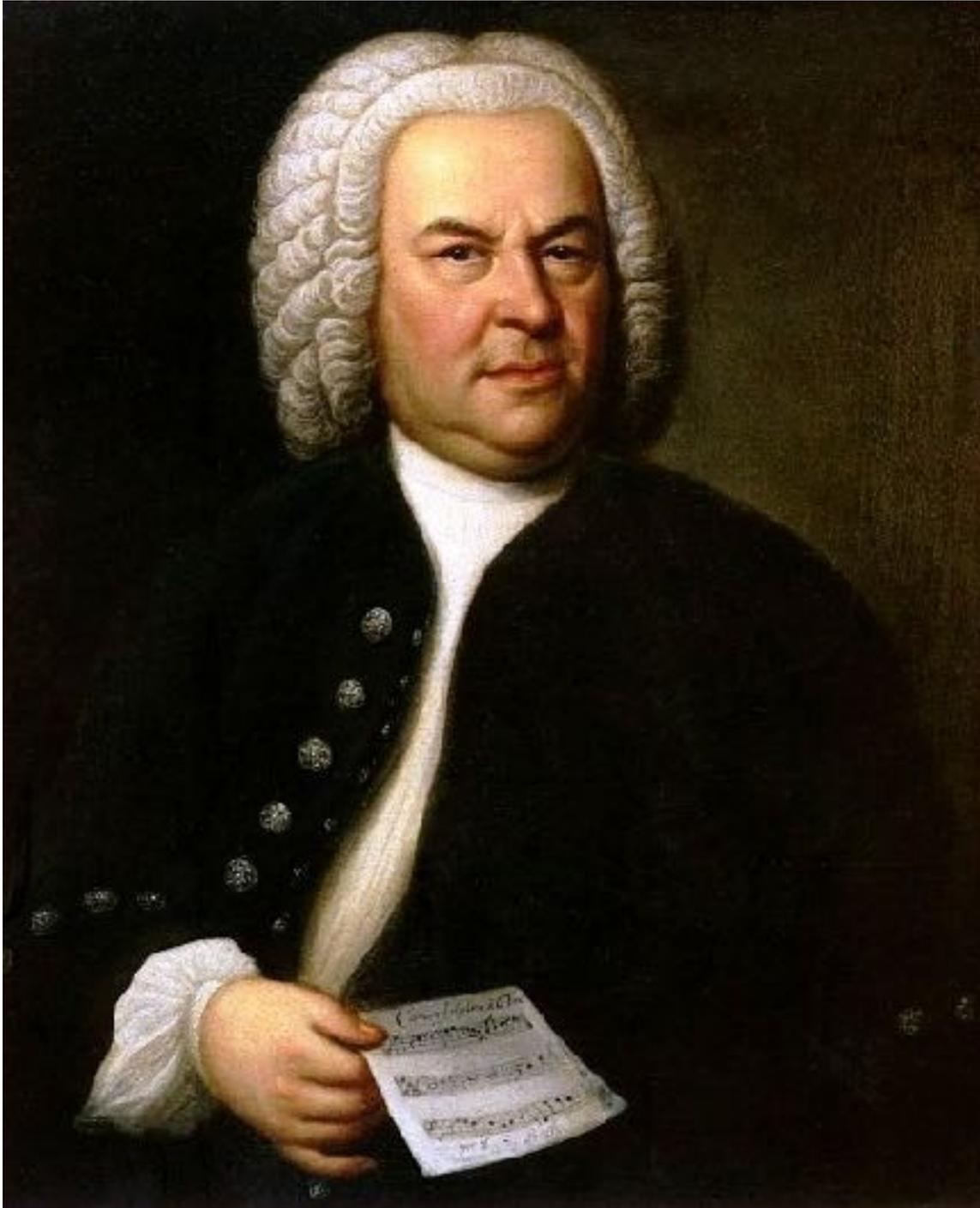
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