

## 'A WELL-TEMPERED CLAVICHORD'

Clavichord recital by Julian Perkins, Trinity College, Cambridge,  
17 October 2009

*Peter Bavington, London*

The title of this recital obviously alluded to the great collection of 48 preludes and fugues by J. S. Bach, but he was not the first to plan such a sequence. Among his precursors was Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer, whose *Ariadne Musica* (published in 1702) must have been well-known to Bach: he paid Fischer the tribute of using some of his fugue subjects in his own work. Fischer's twenty preludes and fugues in various keys and modes are shorter than Bach's, and have much more the character of true *preludes*, so the first four of them formed a suitable 'overture' to Julian Perkins' programme. He moved on to three contrasting items from Book 1 of *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*: the brilliant and cheerful preludes and fugues in G major and F sharp major framing the much darker and more intensely contrapuntal pair in D sharp/E flat minor, the fugue especially grand with its subject which so strikingly prefigures that of *The Art of Fugue*.

As a central interlude Julian returned to the early eighteenth century, and to Bach's predecessor at St Thomas's in Leipzig, Johann Kuhnau. Kuhnau's six Biblical Sonatas are an early example of 'programme music', representing incidents from the Old Testament, in this case Gideon's victory over the Midianites in the Book of Judges. These pieces stretch to the limit the expressive powers of the clavichord, and Julian drew from it a variety of sounds including some which, as demanded by Kuhnau's accompanying text, evoked the tones of trumpets and trombones. Audience members told me afterwards that they were astonished, especially by this 'battle' movement.

For the final element in the programme, Julian performed the last four preludes and fugues from Bach's first book, concluding with the great fugue in B minor, which, as he pointed out in his spoken introduction, includes all twelve notes of the keyboard in its subject. The grandeur and length of this piece made a powerful impression, putting everything that had gone before somewhat in the shade.

It was a challenge, perhaps, to perform this repertoire so convincingly on a diatonically fretted clavichord which incorporates an unequal temperament; but the instrument (by Peter Bavington, 2008) seemed to be well suited to the auditorium, the Frazer Room of Trinity College; there was absolutely no need for anyone to strain to hear. This must be almost the ideal clavichord auditorium: about the size of a large drawing room, and hidden deep within the College, well away from traffic noise. Unfortunately, it is rarely available for public events, so all praise to the organizers, the Cambridge Early Music series, for securing it for this event. There is no lack of interest in clavichord recitals in the district: despite the brisk, rainy weather, too many people turned up for the available space, and some had to be turned away. How sad, then, to see empty seats, booked in advance but not occupied.