Cracking the “Bach” Code

Breakthrough WTC Recording

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Nothing turns music lovers glassy-eyed faster than arid discussions about tuning harpsichords using mean versus just versus Pythagorean temperaments. The debate seems pointless because the victor prevailed quite some time ago: equal-tempered tuning—the tuning heard on virtually all keyboard instruments today. This type of tuning allows all musical keys to be played passably well without unpleasant dissonance, at least to most ears. The downside is that basically every key sounds the same. That’s the price of progress.

But just when the last dying rages of content have been all but snuffed out, who shows up at the door but Johann Sebastian Bach himself, blasting away two centuries of global consensus. He doesn’t arrive with any pedantic treatise in hand, no arcane theories, no lists of tuning ratios, or geometric projections. Bach’s entire scheme is summarized in a six-inch pattern of ingenious looping coils. At first glance, it seems merely a decorative flourish inscribed about the inscrutable title: Das Wohltemperierte Clavier (WTC). On closer inspection, the decoration is a grid of 1754.0x1275.0