Fast and Slow in J.S. Bach's Well Tempered Clavier Books 1 and 2

Abstract:
Some studies have found that subjects give higher preference ratings and clearer emotional descriptions to pieces with the tempo/mode pairs fast/major and slow/minor. If these findings are true, one might expect to find a predominance of fast/major and slow/minor pairings in musical literature. This study looks for just such a trend in the canonical work of J.S. Bach’s Well Tempered Clavier. Books 1 and 2 together contain 24 Major Preludes, 24 Minor Preludes, 24 Major Fugues and 24 Minor Fugues. We use four different measurements of fast/slow tempo based both on elements within the musical notation as well as the interpretive markings of four different music editors: 1. Attacks Per Beat (APB) – measures the number of subdivisions of each piece 2. Attacks Per Minute (APM) – is the APB of a piece multiplied by the editor’s metronome marking 3. Time Signature Distribution and 4. Editor’s Tempo Distribution. We find a significant amount of fast/major and slow/minor pairings in Book 1 but not in Book 2.