

Given the reluctance of most booksellers to stock books about classical music, it takes courage to call a novel *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Yet that is precisely what William Coles has done in his first novel (Legend Press, £7.99), a brilliantly plotted and paced evocation of an affair between a 17-year-old schoolboy and his 23-year-old piano teacher in Eton in the spring of 1982, the Falklands war rumbling in the background.

I doubt whether the real-life Siren on whom India James is based was quite as heart-stoppingly beautiful as this. Still, 25 years ago, when ravishing young female beaks were rather thinner on the ground in Eton than they are today, you didn't need to be a Keira Knightley lookalike.

Our young hero has been playing the piano in a desultory sort of way for seven years. He's reached Grade 5 and has a Mozart sonata from memory, which is neither here nor there in a school awash with high-flying music scholars.

Moments after glimpsing the egregious young goddess on the steps of School Hall, he finds himself in her presence. Distracted by a floral dress and the alluring scent of lily-in-the-valley, he fumbles his way to a halt in the Mozart sonata. At which point the goddess herself slips onto the piano stool and plays the A flat prelude from Book 1 of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. 'It was life-changing. In one hour, I had fallen in love thrice over – with a composer, a piece of music, and a pianist who seemed touched by God'.

As a lightly etched portrait of the world's most famous school, the novel is as good as any there has been. It is also interesting psychologically, not merely as a portrait of youthful infatuation – 'every schoolboy's dream come true' as an admiring Alexander McCall Smith has described it – but as a study of the corrosive power of jealousy.

The press has concentrated on the romance, unsurprisingly so since the sex scenes are exceptionally well written. Mayor Boris has weighed in (if only to deny that he was the young Lothario) as has *Heat* magazine and that favourite berth for aspiring young Etonian journos, *The Sun*, for which Coles once worked.

What no one seems to have mentioned is how good the novel is on Bach. Very few novels use music as well as this. If, as some of the book's more fervent fans hope, it is turned into a movie with Ms Knightley as India James, CDs of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* will be selling in their thousands. Bucking this trend is Coles's erstwhile English teacher, the legendary Michael Meredith. 'Go out and buy a copy,' he urged in a recent review. 'Then read it with Rosalyn Tureck playing the Bach.'

Though Rosalyn Tureck, the greatest Bach pianist of her age, was more used to consorting with philosophers and scientists than *Sun* journalists, she would have relished the drift of Coles's novel. In a wonderful essay that appears with the CD reissue of her revered 1953 recording of these 48 Preludes and Fugues (Deutsche Grammophon 463 305-2), she tells how the music suits every mood and intellectual taste. 'There is fulfilment here, as well as profound instruction for mind, heart, and fingers.'

Her own Bach epiphany also came at the age of 17, though it was some years before she gave up everything for Bach alone. Our hero's epiphany comes during a divinity lesson on St Paul's 'justification by faith', a key to Luther's thinking, and Bach's. Sacrilegiously adapting St Paul's world-changing text, he concludes 'I too am unworthy but, through practice alone, I can earn India's favour'.

The chapter titles come from the '48', Book 1 mainly, beginning with the prelude in A flat, which also provides the brilliantly conceived dénouement years later at an András Schiff Bach recital in Edinburgh's Usher Hall.

The enigmatic C major prelude, likened by Tureck to the smile of the Mona Lisa, sets the relationship on its course; the toccata-like C minor prelude moves it on. Kim's overhearing India breaking down while playing the sublime B flat minor prelude No.22 is his first intimation that all has not been well with her own life. 'Memories, that's all it was,' she tells him. Happier associations come with the E major prelude whose rapturous song speaks of the love that is about to be.

As the novel progresses, we are left to make our own connections. The consummation itself, enacted beneath dripping chestnut trees on the Long Walk in Windsor Great Park, calls forth the prelude in D, music of bravura splendour, perfectly befitting the longed-for moment.