

© 2017 Paul Griffiths.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

The Art of the Fugue, BWV 1080

By the time he was in his mid-fifties, Bach had composed all the music he could possibly have needed, for the church, for concerts, for domestic music-making, for private practice, for teaching. From now on, he devoted himself to great projects that would not only sum up all his musical experience, including his experience of the past, but would also convey that experience on through time to come. *The Art of the Fugue*, or *Die Kunst der Fuga*, as he called it in his manuscript, is one of these: an unprecedented triumph of contrapuntal art, taking the form of fourteen fugues and four canons, set in motion by a single D minor subject.

The work is like a great building in which the same design element is repeated in numerous ways, except that, this being music, and in particular this being fugue, what we experience is the colossal architecture in process of formation. Also, this being music, the architecture assembling itself is made simultaneously of sound, shape, color, texture, purpose, feeling, and more.

When it was achieved is not clear. Much of it may have been composed simultaneously with the *Goldberg Variations* (published in 1741) and the second book of *The Well Tempered Clavier*, but with additions to come much later in the decade, at the time of *The Musical Offering* and the last segments of the B minor Mass. Unlike those four other compendia, the work was left not quite finished. Of that, more later.

The music is unfinished in another sense, in that Bach left no instructions for its realization. He prepared it for publication in open score, i.e. with each of the four parts on a separate staff, which to some has suggested he was thinking in terms of the imaginary voices of the reading mind. However, it cannot be by chance that everything

fits two hands at a keyboard. Moreover, there is much in this music – pathos and comedy, intricacy and color, obsessiveness and delight – that calls out for performance. Together with sublime abstraction, *The Art of Fugue* maintains many other possibilities in counterpoint, for the player and for those who listen.

Bach also changed his mind about the order of the eighteen items, though always there was to be a progression in complexity. In his time, the purpose for such music would have been pedagogical, to impart, through performance under the young musician's fingers, how to play fugues and how to compose them. It is not wholly impossible, though, that Bach could have imagined, far off in the future, the whole work being presented in performance, as eventually came about on June 26, 1927, fittingly in the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, in an orchestration by the twenty-year-old Swiss musician Wolfgang Graeser. While always a special occasion, the work has since then been taken into the repertoires of organists, harpsichord players, pianists, and string quartets.

In anyone's ordering, the beginning is with a group of simple fugues, ones that have no countersubjects or speed-changes, each of them introducing the subject in a different register (alto, bass, tenor, soprano, in that order), with increasing levels of complication. Of course, as in any fugue, the makeup of the subject is crucial. This one begins by stoutly outlining the tonic triad: from the keynote (D) up to the fifth (A), down to the third (F), and back down to the keynote. The next step is down again, necessarily chromatically, to the seventh (C sharp), firmly on the beat, introducing a harshness, an irritation, that will have to be resolved in the rest of the line, the rest of the fugue, the rest of the whole complex of fugues.

By the rules of fugue, the subject has an answer, at the fifth above or fourth below, so starting on A and, to preserve the D minor harmony, going up a fourth instead of a fifth (thus A–D–C–A–G sharp–, etc.). A four-voice fugue will then begin subject–answer–subject–answer.

The first two fugues here show the simplest case, with these successive entries coming regularly, four measures apart. As Joseph Kerman points out in his book on Bach's fugues, the achievement of an elemental fugue, with no countersubject, variation, or subdividing of the theme, is itself a virtuoso feat in *Contrapunctus I*. (The composer's

second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, used this antique term in his posthumous edition.) What is supremely plain, though, can as it closes come up with drama.

Starting in the bass, Contrapunctus II is able to introduce the voices successively higher, as if demonstrating that this is a four-story building (with the top voice going onto the roof halfway through). Meanwhile, the theme's tail comes in dotted rhythm, which continues to the end of the piece and goes on to become a feature of the entire composition; thus the work grows, by learning from its own experience, or by gradually expressing its musical genes. Dealing with chromatic corners is also in its chromosomes.

Chromaticism arises more thoroughly in Contrapunctus III, which inverts the theme, so that it starts with a falling fourth, from D down to A, from which it rises through an A minor triad (A–C–E). The intensity of the asserted C sharp, now at the beginning of the fourth measure, is so much the keener, with effects running through the piece. For one thing, the subject is taken to different pitch levels, starting on C or G. It also spawns rhythmic variants.

In Contrapunctus IV, the theme is again inverted, but so is the order of subject and answer. This results in smoother harmony, which, however, Bach keeps disrupting with a little chromatic knot in eighth notes.

The next three fugues are based on a variant of the subject from Contrapunctus III. This is combined contrapuntally with segments of itself in constant variety, in a technique known as “stretto,” using right-side-up and inverted forms simultaneously. Contrapunctus V immediately inverts the subject to make its answer.

Contrapunctus VI adds the complication that the answer, following hard upon the subject, comes at double speed (“diminished,” in contrapuntal parlance). Dotted rhythms and ornamental swirls of thirty-second notes evoke the style of a French overture, creating a comedy of fussiness.

In Contrapunctus VII, the speed relationship between subject and answer is reversed, and the answer goes at half speed (“augmented”). The play of sixteenth notes is almost continuous, catching segments of the subject as if in shifting mirrors.

Each of the next four fugues has more than one subject, whether two (double fugues) or three (triple fugues). Contrapunctus VIII, a triple fugue in three voices, starts

out like a round, an image of conviviality, and comes to a full close before moving on to its second subject, which has bouncing repeated notes. The piece almost comes to a close again, but then, at last, secures its place in *The Art of the Fugue* by bringing in a new variant of the work's basic subject – inverted and in three-note segments – which it intertwines with the earlier two themes, towards an ending that has the three superposed.

Contrapunctus IX also begins with a new subject, an octave leap followed by running eighth notes, and when the *Art of the Fugue* theme is introduced – a third of the way through, augmented – it is in its basic form, unheard since Contrapunctus I. The piece displays invertible counterpoint “alla duodecima”, which works when the lower of two voices shifts up an octave while the lower goes down a twelfth.

Similarly a double fugue, Contrapunctus X once more starts on a new subject, played right-side-up and inverted. The *Art of the Fugue* theme is inverted this time, and in dotted rhythm. There are also examples of the more difficult art of invertible counterpoint “alla decima,” at the tenth.

The second triple fugue, in four voices, Contrapunctus XI balances the first by repeating its subjects in reverse order, so that now the *Art of the Fugue* marker comes first. There are three additional themes, most notably one with creeping chromatic scale fragments.

After all this growing complexity, the next fugue sounds clear and placid, but is so only because the compositional ingenuity here is remarkable in another way.

Contrapunctus XII is a mirror fugue composed so that it may be inverted wholesale, each voice going in contrary motion and the entire thing being turned upside-down, so that where the voices entered in descending order in the original form, in the inversion, placed first here, they ascend, and what was the top line is now the bass. The fugue has a little finial that works, of course, in either position.

The mirror works a little differently in Contrapunctus XIII, a second fugue in three voices. All the voices can be inverted, but in this form, which is the one Kimiko Ishizaka plays, the top voice moves to the middle, the middle to the bass, and the bass to the top. Given triplet rhythm as well as a dotted tail, the *Art of the Fugue* subject becomes

unexpectedly jocular.

Following the order of C.P.E. Bach's edition, we move to the four two-part canons Bach père composed on his *Art of the Fugue* subject. In the first, a strange variant of the theme provokes an answer below that is both inverted and augmented. The dialog of fast and slow continues, until the upper voice stops, only to find that the lower has just started on its path. From this point, the whole canon is repeated with the bass line the faster.

Next comes a canon at the octave on an inverted form, in 9/16 time.

Contrasting with the simplicity of this quasi-gigue, the third canon, at the tenth, is again austere and ingenious, dancing different counterpoints against the subject as it moves between the voices at the start, and again having the lines exchange positions halfway through.

The concluding canon at the twelfth does this, too. Where in the other canons the voices are separated by four measures, here the gap is eight, which – together with the self-similarity of the line, allowing for a lot of local imitation – nicely obscures how one part follows the other.

It was after the canons that C.P.E. Bach placed a fugue his father had not finished, or of which he could not find the ending, and called it 'Fuga a 3 soggetti', though it is now generally given a name to associate it with its companions: Contrapunctus XIV.

Quite how it relates to those companions, however, is uncertain, for its three subjects do not include the *The Art of the Fugue* theme, even if the first of them might recall the basic state of that theme in its sober motion and opening fifth. When the consideration of this first subject is brought to a close, the second spins away in an alto solo, and then the third begins with the notes spelling BACH in German nomenclature (B flat – A – C – B). Of the many scholars and performers who have offered completions, some have brought in the *Art of the Fugue* theme as a fourth subject. Others, like Kimiko Ishizaka (whose completion starts at 6:35 in the final track), prefer to work with the material Bach provided for this piece, and with the lessons that have been conveyed throughout the composition.