

BACH: THE ART OF FUGUE, BWV 1080

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: Born in Eisenach, March 21, 1685; died in Leipzig, July 28, 1750

More than two and a half centuries after its composition, Bach's *Art of Fugue* (*Die Kunst der Fuge*) remains one of the towering pinnacles in the landscape of western music. One can only stand back in astonishment at the intellectual rigor that produced such a formidable piece of musical architecture, yet at the same time admire it for the esthetic pleasure it provides on a purely intuitive level. Bach himself said that his purpose in writing was to “refresh the spirit” of music lovers.

Aside from one fugue, the manuscript of *The Art of Fugue* was complete upon Bach's death; only the work involved in making a fair copy for the printer remained unfinished. *The Art of Fugue* was published in 1751, the year following Bach's death, yet, unaccountably, there was no performance until 1927, when it was given in the Thomaskirche (a church where Bach worked) in Leipzig on July 28 (the date of his death) under the direction of Karl Straube.

In the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which occupied Bach for much of his creative life, the composer explored the world of the fugue in 48 *different* examples, twice each in the twelve major and twelve minor keys. In *The Art of Fugue*, he explored this world even further by systematically working out the *same* twelve-note fugal subject in myriad ways, all in the same key (D minor). One often reads that this was Bach's “last” composition, but in fact the project occupied him, on and off, for nearly a decade, beginning in the early 1740s and extending up to his death in 1750. The fourteen numbers for four voices (called *contrapuncti*), the four canons for two voices, and the final, incomplete *contrapunctus* constitute a veritable textbook of fugal writing, a summation of every manner of manipulation one might conceive in attempting to write fugues.

As a performing score, the manuscript is notoriously imprecise – “notoriously” since Bach left no indication as to which instrument(s) should play it. Scholars and musicians have put forth compelling arguments for its performance on the harpsichord, the organ, a four-part ensemble of similar instruments and a four-part ensemble of dissimilar instruments. Recordings exist today as well for piano, double reed ensemble, wind ensemble, brass ensemble (notably by Canadian Brass) string orchestra, full orchestra, band, and quartets of flutes, saxophones and strings. In Straube's world premiere performance in 1927, he used a variety of instruments,

ranging from harpsichord alone to full orchestra. Nor is the order of the individual pieces specified. In any case, Bach probably did not expect that the entire work would be played at one sitting. For convenience sake, we assign numbers to the various parts, but in performance they can be arranged to suit the preference of each performer or conductor.

Contrapuncti (Counterpoints) Nos. 1-4 are “simple” fugues, each consisting of the elaboration of a single fugal subject. Nos. 3 and 4 expose the subject of Nos. 1 and 2 with the intervals inverted. A fugue may be defined as a composition in which a principal melodic idea is subjected to contrapuntal treatment in multiple voices (most often three or four). The word derives from the Latin *fugare*, to flee, suggesting the contrapuntal procedure in which the voices chase and flee each other.

Nos. 5, 6 and 7 are “counterfugues,” in which the subject is paired with its own inversion. In No. 6 the subject appears in diminution (played twice as fast) as well, while No. 7 incorporates both diminution and augmentation.

No. 8 is unusual in that it contains not just one subject but three, which are combined in various ways.

Then there are the four canons in two voices, whereby the second voice enters after a specified delay, presenting the same line as the first voice but at a different interval (the octave, the fifth, the twelfth, etc.). In each canon, the melodic line is derived from the original fugal subject of the first *contrapunctus*, but the rhythm may be substantially altered. Essentially, a canon employs fugal procedures but in only two voices.

No. 13 is a “mirror” fugue, a phenomenon demanding the utmost in intellectual acrobatics from the composer, for the music must work perfectly both directly (*rectus*) and with each interval inverted (*inversus*). Hence, it is played twice.

And finally there is that magnificent, unfinished fugue that breaks off in mid-sentence, as it were. By this point, nearly 250 measures into the fugue, Bach has exposed and developed three different fugal subjects. The first is a palindrome (same pitches heard forward and backward) in long notes. The second moves along much quicker and incorporates all the pitches, in order, except the first two, of the original fugal subject of *Contrapunctus* No. 1. And the third begins with the four notes that spell Bach’s name (in German musical orthography, B = B-flat, H = B-natural).