JOSEPH KERMAN

The Art of Fugue

BACH FUGUES FOR KEYBOARD · 1715–1750

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BY DAVITT MORONEY AND KAREN ROSENAK

CHAPTER 5

Contrapunctus 1

The Art of Fugue

Bach prepared *The Art of Fugue* for publication in open score, after having composed it on two staves, in the usual keyboard-music format. The work is a staggering compendium of nearly twenty fugues and canons all based on a single theme, and open-score format—with each voice on its own stave—showed off the contrapuntal devices applied to this ur-theme as clearly as possible. Technical exploits on this scale were unmatched in his own earlier work or that of any other composer then known (then or ever, perhaps). Bach died in 1750, before signing off on *The Art of Fugue,* and for more than two hundred years it was admired and revered, if not always greatly loved, as his last musical testament, undertaken at the end of his life and never completed because of illness and then death.

In the twentieth century, inevitably, his ostensibly abstract score became a very honeypot for performers of every possible sort. It has been recorded by string quartets, orchestras, saxophone quartets, harpsichordists, organists, pianists, and even a

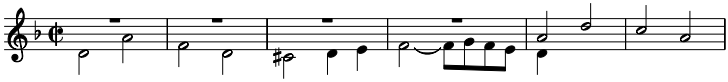
consort of seventeenth-century viols. But for this composer learned display was inseparable from practical performance. He wrote the fugues to be played on a harpsichord, and while opinions may differ as to whether that should privilege harpsichord as their ideal performance medium, it should certainly earn them a privileged place on every keyboard player's music stand.

Most of the fugues differ significantly from any Bach had composed earlier. Some are contrapuntally much more complex, loaded with strettos, diminutions, augmentations, and inversions. Some are simpler, for in order to set off the technical virtuosity that was the work's raison d'être, Bach had the extraordinary idea of making its first number a fugue *without* contrapuntal devices. Contrapunctus 1 has neither strettos, diminutions, and so on, nor even countersubjects or recurring episodes. These devices will be introduced only in the succeeding contrapuncti, one by one. In Contrapunctus 1 invertible counterpoint itself is in very short supply. This elemental fugue never modulates beyond the obligatory dominant and subdominant keys.

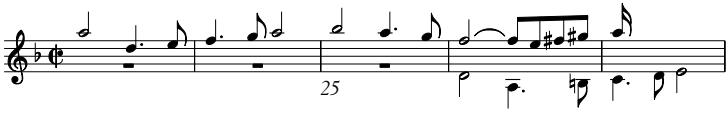
Of course, as many have pointed out, what Bach accomplished here amounts to a kind of negative virtuosity, for if you set up a fugue subject ahead of time with countersubjects and strettos they will write the fugue for you (some of it, much of it). It is a lot harder to write a convincing fugue without the usual aids. Also extraordinary, and paradoxical, is Bach's decision to open a work like *The Art of Fugue* with a fugue that evokes improvisation. There is actually a written-out cadenza at the end. Paradoxical, because if one improvises a fugue with a simple subject tailor-made for strettos—as this subject is—it is almost perverse to eschew them. Compare the fugal Prelude in E-flat Major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier,* book 1 (pages 71–72).

Example 5

a. Contrapunctus 1



b. Contrapunctus 10



In any case, this most basic of fugues is necessarily also one of Bach's freest and must also be one of his smoothest. This quality is related to an archaic impulse that has often been noted in his later works. Still, the seamless style that he developed for *The Art of Fugue,* starting with its first number, does not sound much like the seamless style of sixteenth-century "Palestrina counterpoint." The contrapuntal lines, consisting mostly of quarter- and eighth-note patterns, move stepwise or by the smallest leaps, and the expectations of eighteenth-century harmony often go unfulfilled. Strong cadences are shunned. While such generalities only begin to explain the almost mesmeric fluency of Bach's late style, they may help sensitize us to contrasts where it is abrogated, such as at those episodes featuring larger leaps *[bars 29–30, 36–40, 49–53],* and at the one really, decisively strong cadence *[bar 74]*.

Smoothness is all in this fugue, one feels. It is less articulated or segmented than other fugues—it is hardly segmented at all. The exposition presents the subject and answer uneventfully at regular four-bar intervals (see example 5). No doubt the absence of links or episodes also feels "elemental."

Eventually the surface does begin to ruffle, when in a new exposition the bass steps in on the heels of its predecessor and enters after three bars rather than four *[bar 32]*. This entry—it can be heard as a second stab at stretto, after a previous, premature effort in bars 29–30, what is sometimes called a false stretto—moves rather hastily from the dominant around to the subdominant, twisting and turning the subject oddly. Then the tenor entry, as though checked by the low As in the bass, hesitates, accumulating dissonances—sevenths, ninths, and pungent augmented intervals *[bars 41, 42, 43]*. The soprano in this group of entries emerges as a sort of ethereal climax, led into by another false stretto. The bass drops out, allowing for heightened activity in the remaining voices, like a beating of wings *[bars 48–54]*.

Past the exposition, then, the piece can be seen to grow increasingly complex, though the feeling seems to me not exactly of complexity but of complexities tested out and drifted past, ideas considered and shelved, in a constantly changing improvisational field of a unique kind. Endlessly fertile and quite unstoppable, Bach proceeds spontaneously, almost distractedly, until the piece pulls itself together with one grand gesture, the long dominant pedal in the bass from bar 63 to bar 73.

Literally, of course, the pitch A drops out at bar 66, but in the ear it lasts all the way, so the passage has the effect of a cadenza, an increasingly rhapsodic epilogue during which pitch rises and tension mounts until it is too much to bear—or so we must infer; the buildup is so smooth we had no inkling of impending crisis. This programmatically seamless music literally breaks off, stammers, and finally sinks—truly sinks—to rest. To this aporia some performers add improvised ornaments or flourishes. These cushion the break and seem somehow to humanize the crisis.

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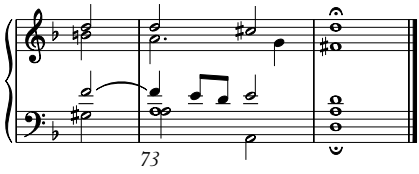
An elemental fugue evoking improvisation, without contrapuntal artifice—this is true, but as one gets to know it better, intriguing details of purposeful counterpoint begin to show up just below the surface. While Bach may abjure countersubjects, Benito Rivera has shown in a close analysis how shards of countersubject material, as it were, contribute a pervasive sameness and tranquility to the free flow (compare, for example, details at the beginning of bars 7, 11, 15, 42, 51, and 58). There are no recurring episodes in the ordinary sense, but the two-part canon in the first episode reappears later under bright new streams of soprano melody *[bars 17–22, 36–39, 67–70].* No strettos—but as we have seen, false stretto used quietly to great effect.

As for Bach's use of the solemn term "contrapunctus," that accords with his evident intention in *The Art of Fugue* to control counterpoint as a universal principle, rather than simply the genre of fugue. Made up of canons and fugues of various kinds all based on a single theme, the work encompasses more than one contrapuntal process. (The original title of *Die Kunst der Fuge,* added to Bach's manuscript in another hand, was *Die Kunst der Fuga,* "fuga" being the archaic, and by now pedantic Latin term for imitative counterpoint.) In fact, the project was not the swan song it was thought to be after its publication in 1751: an early version exists from as early as 1742–46, and whereas the final publication remains a torso, the early text looks complete; it is preserved as an autograph fair copy that could have gone right to the printer after one or two final touches. This text, though it received more and more touches over the years and was obviously superseded by the printed version, has its own integrity. Had Bach died a few years earlier, *The Art of Fugue* would now

Example 6



be admired and revered among the great masterworks of Western music in the early version.

For the final version, Bach expanded Contrapunctus 1 beyond its state in the autograph. He also composed two extra fugues for the collection and expanded others, most extensively Contrapunctus 10: see pages 39–49. Originally Contrapunctus 1 closed four bars earlier, prior to the final subject entry that now seals the cadence and bathes it in a wash of fresh color *[bars 74–78]*. The original ending, shown in example 6, is less celebratory, more radical and romantic.