

BACH 730 - THE ART OF THE FUGUE - BWV 1080

On December 2nd, 1717, 32-year-old Johann Sebastian Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque Age. His master was the young Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, at barely 25 a relative youngster like Bach and indeed seven years Bach's junior. The Prince maintained a fine orchestra of talented leading players, and when the Prince traveled, Bach and some of the best Court musicians (together with instruments, including an ingenious folding harpsichord) would accompany him on his extensive journeys. A popular destination lay just over the hills in Bohemia: the fashionable Spa of Carlsbad, meeting place of the European aristocracy, of Czech, German, Russian and Polish royalty and nobility. The Taking of the Waters was only one attraction; these were dazzling aristocratic gatherings of Counts, Princes and Noblemen, and musical concerts were organized daily in which resident and visiting musicians would have participated. Bach made at least two visits, in 1717 and 1720, at which time his Instrumental Concertos, Sonatas, and Solo Clavier works would have been enjoyed by a distinguished audience. The tradition continued, with visits of later celebrities such as Beethoven, Chopin, Wagner and others.

A slightly later developer was the nearby Spa of Marienbad, which also hosted such names as Liszt, Strauss, Mark Twain, King Umberto of Italy, and King Edward VII. One of the attractions of Marienbad is its careful town planning dating from the early 1800s, the central feature of which is a magnificent Colonnade in which fashionable guests may take the waters, or simply stroll to see and be seen. It is the roofscape of this Grand Colonnade that we have chosen to illustrate the cover of our booklet. Its structure combines complexity and structural integrity with beauty – indeed the two are inter-dependent, and each may be considered the result of the other. Thus with the Art of the Fugue; this is some of the most structured, and structurally complex music ever composed, yet in its complexity and structural integrity lies the secret of its beauty, a beauty which can indeed be experienced and enjoyed without any knowledge or awareness of the underlying structure whatsoever.

The relationship between structure and emotion was expressed indirectly by Bach during the artistic dispute between himself and Scheibe during the years 1737-1739:

The true amenity of music consists in the connection and alternation of consonances and dissonances without hurt to the harmony. The nature of music demands this. The various passions, especially the dark ones, cannot be expressed with fidelity to Nature without this alternation.

In Bach's view of nature and harmony, the connection and alternation of consonances and dissonances was governed by *counterpoint*. And it is the timeless value of counterpoint, way beyond the scope of old and new techniques, styles, or manners of composing, that he thought needed to be upheld. Perhaps even more than before, Bach's compositions written or revised during and after the Scheibe controversy reflect a deliberate emphasis on the principles of counterpoint, and nowhere can the principles of counterpoint be more richly applied than in the composition of the fugue. In this genre, Bach not only excelled without equal, but set new standards of technique, form, and performance. Bach knew both what had been achieved by others in this branch of composition and where his own contributions had a particular impact. He could see that to a considerable extent, his place in history would be that of "Fugue Master." Thus, it should hardly surprise us that he devised a plan that would center systematically on fugal composition, something neither he nor anyone else had ever done before.

The Art of Fugue, though linked to earlier fugal compositions, moves to a level that is utterly novel. The entire multi-sectional work is derived from the same thematic material, a musical plan that presupposes a far-reaching thought process regarding the harmonic-contrapuntal implications of the chosen theme. The result is more than a study of the fugue: it is a compendium of the range offered by the utmost concentration and the highest technical demands of instrumental counterpoint.

The governing idea of the work was an exploration in depth of the contrapuntal possibilities inherent in a single musical subject. The carefully constructed subject would generate many movements, each demonstrating one or more contrapuntal principles and each, therefore, resulting in a self-contained fugal form.

Bach crafted an easily identifiable subject whose regular and inverted versions, if sounding together in a contrapuntal relationship, resulted in flawless and attractive harmony. Bach consistently used the term

Contrapunctus, which may be applied equally to a Fugue or a Canon. The main subject (theme) is inverted, subjected to subtle variations, and joined by contrasting counter-subjects (new themes). Then the different types of counterpoint are introduced according to increasing difficulty and complexity.

A small vocabulary covers the essential terms. A *Fugue* is, quite simply, a composition in which a short, basic melody – the theme – which is announced at the outset, is brought in again and again in the various other voices. The theme may be given “straight”. It may be “inverted”, when the upward interval between two notes becomes an equal downward interval, and vice versa. The note values may be halved (diminution), or doubled (augmentation). In a simple fugue, each new entry of the theme waits until the previous entry is completed; in a “stretto” fugue, entry two will begin before entry one is completed, so that two entries of the theme overlap. Another device is “total inversion”, where not just the theme, but an entire fugal composition is completely inverted, or turned up-side-down. A counter-subject is a second or third theme which may be a variant of the main theme, or a totally new subject.

In a *Canon*, a longer theme is repeated and overlapped in the different parts like a “round”; the title, *alla terza*, *alla decima* etc – at the third, at the tenth, indicates the interval at which each new repetition is to enter. In our recording the Canons are tonally distinguished by performance on the organ: the historic instrument in Naumburg built by Hildebrandt, then tested and certified in 1747 by Bach himself and his organ-builder colleague Gottfried Silbermann, of whom Hildebrandt had been a pupil.

In addition to his progressive demonstration of the different types of counter-point, Bach gradually increases the animation of the subject, adding a new dimension to the compositional makeup of the movements.

The *Art of the Fugue* was probably begun in the late 1730s, a first draft appearing in 1742, with later additions following. An Unfinished Fugue based on the name B-A-C-H, often appended in performance at the end of the main work, bears no direct relationship to the *Art* and was not included in the Original Edition, nor therefore in this recording.

Any performance of the *Art of the Fugue* must take into consideration both instrumentation and order of presentation, for Bach left no indication. The Fugues were written out in open score with no indication of instrumentation. It is as if the music exists in mental, or even spiritual form, to be read and played “in the head” by those able to do so, and for others, to be given with whatever voices or instruments may come to hand – provided only that they respect and balance with one another, for in a Fugue more than any other type of composition, it is vital to hear each voice individually, as well as in balanced combination with others. Our performance is given by a chamber orchestra, alternating with a string quartet; we feel that this instrumentation offers the listener what we consider to be the two most important factors: clarity of structure, and enjoyability.

Regarding the order of Fugues, Bach was at least very clear on one point: that the Fugues should progress in complexity. We have respected this obvious indication, but with a qualification: we feel that the complete work is far too demanding to be heard in one sitting, so we offer our program in the form of two Programs each complete in itself, each offering all the major structural forms, each starting with simplicity then continuing into increasing complexity, and each ending with a powerful Triple Fugue.

How, as we listen, may we visualize the Master? One popular portrait of Bach is by Elias Gottlieb Haussmann, Court Painter at Dresden. Bach is seen holding a fragment of a Canon. Though widely used in musical literature today, the somewhat distorted expression was surely not an accurate image of the Master. Haussmann painted the portraits of several of Leipzig’s Mayors, and on close inspection one is struck by the fineness of the brushwork and accuracy of detail, in complete contrast to the hurried brushwork, rough strokes and lack of detail in Haussmann’s Bach portrait. There is in fact a long Leipzig tradition, that Bach was always in a hurry, would never sit for long, and that Haussmann complained he was never able to finish the work properly. Be that as it may, an alternative is the wonderful *Altersbild*, the *Portrait of Bach In Old Age* shown on the back cover of our booklet, an original painting, which was first seen reproduced in 1904 as Volume IV part 2 of the *New Bachgesellschaft*. Here, surely, is the strict yet compassionate face of the Bach whose latter years gave us the B-Minor Mass, the Goldberg Variations, the Musical Offering and the *Art of the Fugue*.