

BACH 760-1 - J.S. BACH: THE ART OF THE FUGUE - BWV 1080

The governing idea of *The Art of the Fugue* 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 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, though now added by tradition.

THE MUSICAL OFFERING - BWV 1079

One of Bach's great friends and working colleagues was the master Organ-builder Gottfried Silbermann. The two worked closely together on matters of organ construction and acoustics. Bach in Leipzig and Silbermann in Freiberg were sufficiently close to one another to permit frequent visits, and Silbermann was godfather to Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel. In later years Bach and Silbermann became interested in the fortepiano, an instrument which, like the clavichord, but unlike the harpsichord, was capable of tonal variations controlled by the player's touch on the keys. They collaborated closely on the complex escapement mechanism, and production went ahead with some of the world's first pianos at Silbermann's Freiberg workshops. One early customer was King Frederick the Great of Prussia, who ordered several (accounts vary from 7 to 14!) for his palace at Potsdam. That he should test and improvise upon some of these instruments was one possible reason why Bach, his health starting to fail, was invited to make the long, over 400-mile journey in 1747 from Leipzig to Potsdam. Other reasons would have been the fact that his son Carl Philip Emanuel was Harpsichordist to the King; not least was Bach's great reputation and the high esteem in which he was by then held throughout Germany - contemporary accounts indicate that the King having made several requests finally insisted that Bach visit him.

Thus it was that newspapers in all the major German cities picked up the official Potsdam Press release of May 11, 1747: “*One hears from Potsdam that last Sunday [May 7] the famous Capellmeister from Leipzig, Mr. Bach, arrived with the intention to have the pleasure of hearing the excellent Royal music there. In the evening, at about the time when the regular chamber music in the Royal apartments usually begins, His Majesty was informed that Capellmeister Bach had arrived at Potsdam and was waiting in His Majesty's anti-chamber for His Majesty's most gracious permission to listen to the music. His August self immediately gave orders that Bach be admitted, and went, at his entrance, to the so-called Forte-et-Piano, condescending also to play, in His Most August Person and without any preparation, a theme for the Capellmeister Bach, which he should execute in a fugue. This was done so happily by the aforementioned Capellmeister that not only His Majesty was pleased to show his satisfaction thereat, but also all those present were seized with astonishment. Mr. Bach found the theme propounded to him so exceedingly beautiful that he intends to set it down on paper as a regular fugue and have it engraved on copper.*”

On Monday, the famous man let himself be heard on the organ in the Church of the Holy Spirit at Potsdam and earned general acclaim from the listeners attending in great number. In the evening, His Majesty charged him again with the execution of a fugue, in six parts, which he accomplished just as skillfully as on the previous occasion, to the pleasure of His Majesty and to the general admiration.”

The work which Bach later sent the King is known today as the *Musical Offering*; and includes a *Trio Sonata*, two *Ricercari*, and a

number of *Canons* all featuring the King's Theme or variations thereon. A florid letter of dedication accompanied the manuscripts. Heading the manuscript is the title *Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta*. The initial letters spell the word RICERCAR: the literal translation is: *By the King's Command, the Theme and its Variations Resolved in Canonic Art*. The Musical Offering is in effect an "Art of the Canon", written at a very "theoretical" period at the end of Bach's life together with the *Canonic Variations* and the *Art of the Fugue*.

We open the *Musical Offering* with the Trio Sonata, as an Overture, in which the Royal Theme gradually makes appearances. The main Canonic material consists of two groups of Five Canons, the first, Canons on the Royal Theme, the second Canons on derivatives or variations of the Royal Theme. At the beginning and the end of the two groups of Canons come the two *Ricercari*, first the Three-part *Ricercare*, lastly the Six-part *Ricercare*.

The *Canon* is one of the simplest of musical devices, based purely on repetition: the same musical line is repeated at intervals, in different parts (SATB). The melody can be repeated as written, or a third, a fifth, an octave etc. higher or lower. It is also necessary to know at what point in the melody, other repetitions enter. Most *Canons* come with their "solutions" provided, either in the written score, or in a clue provided in the title. In some cases however, Bach does not give these necessary clues to the 'solution' of the *Canon*, leaving it up to the player to discover.

Five Canons on the Royal Theme

1. **Canon a 2 super Thema Regium**. This is known as the "Crab Canon" since the melody is played simultaneously from beginning to end, and (turning the music up-side-down) from end to beginning. 2. **Canon a 2 Per motum contrarium** – *in contrary motion*. Theme in the upper line; two-part Canon in the lower line - the second Canon-part being a mirrored reflection of the written part. 3. **Canon perpetuus super Thema Regium**. The theme, in the top line, is accompanied by a two-part Canon, lower line. The double indication at the beginning of the lower stave shows that the melody is repeated two octaves lower. A sign between the staves at bar 3 shows where the repetition begins. 4. **Canon a due Violini in unisono**. Theme in the bass, two-part Canon in the upper line. 5. **Fuga Canonica in Epidiapente**. For 3 voices, here flute, violin and bass. The violin and bass begin with the two parts as written. At the sign in bar eleven, the flute comes in with the top line a fifth higher (*epidiapente*).

Five Canons on Variations of the Royal Theme

1. **Canon a 2 Per Tonos** – Theme in the top line, Canon with repeat specified in the lower line. Here, Bach specifies that each time round, the whole thing is to be played a whole tone higher, from C, through D, E, F sharp, A flat, B flat, resolved on its return to the octave. Bach adds *Ascendenteque Modulatione, ascendat Gloria Regis* – with the ascending modulations, may the King's glory ascend. 2. **Canon a 2 Per augmentationem, contrario motu**. Like the previous Canon, the theme is in the upper line, but this time slightly varied. The first Canon-repetition appears in the lower line, the second part being a reflection of it, but with all note values doubled (augmented). 3. **Canon a 2 "Quaerendo invenietis"** – *Search and ye shall find*. The inverted bass clef gives a clue as to the nature of the Canon-repetition, but at what point does the repetition begin? Two solutions are offered here, the second being an inversion of the first. 4. **Canon Perpetuus** – *for flute, violin & continuo*. Against a continuo bass, lower line, the flute plays the upper line as written. The second Canon-part, violin, enters at bar 3 playing the top line inverted. 5. **Canon a 4**. We know from the title that this is a Canon for four parts, SATB. But where they enter is left to the performers to resolve! Despite its structural simplicity, this Canon, along with the two *Ricercari*, is one of the most magnificent pieces in the Musical Offering collection. It leads naturally into the crowning conclusion: the monumental **Six-part Ricercare**, here given full reign on the pedal-harpsichord.

Isolde Ahlgrimm was a pioneer in many respects. Her active musical life began in Vienna during the difficult years of WW2. Having studied on the modern piano, she quickly took up the fortepiano or hammerklavier, the forerunner of the piano. Finding instruments was simple and cheap – the fortepiano was then regarded as an outdated and useless instrument. Yet her performances of Mozart proved a revelation for the Viennese musical public, and indeed Peter Watchorn, Isolde Ahlgrimm's last student and biographer, was told recently by Paul Badura-Skoda that it was his and Jörg Demus' attendance at one of Isolde's Mozart Cycle concerts in 1949 that convinced them to take up the fortepiano. Isolde then moved on to explore the harpsichord, adding an organ-type pedal board – another pioneering innovation. Playing always from memory, she gave complete Bach cycles in her Vienna apartments, as well as lecture-recitals.

Further biographical information: <http://www.BaroqueMusic.org/IsoldeAhlgrimm.html>