

BHP 909 - J.S. Bach: The Art of the Fugue on 2 Pianos - Joseph & Grete Dichler

"*The Art of the Fugue*" (*Die Kunst der Fuge*), as its name implies, was intended as, and effectively provides, a complete treatise on the Art of Fugal composition, dealing with every type of fugal treatment from the simplest to the most complex.

It may be supposed that Bach had intended to have this work published under his instruction. He had since 1720 been publishing periodic treatises on different styles of composition "for connoisseurs and amateurs" under the series title *Clavierübung* or Keyboard Exercise. The 1749 Musical Offering, though dedicated to King Frederick and based on a Royal Theme, in fact became under Bach's hands a treatise on Canonic Composition. Of the significant forms of composition current in Baroque times covered by Bach, only the Fugue, perhaps the most important, was then left outstanding. The Master died before he was able to publish the work. Indeed some scholars believe that the work was left unfinished, as Bach was working on a complex fugue when he died, and although the editor of the original "Complete Bach Edition" regarded this Fugue as having no connection with *The Art of the Fugue*. Gustav Nottebohm showed ("Die Musikwelt" Berlin, 1880/1) that with some manipulation the main theme of *The Art of the Fugue* could be made to fit, thus adding to the already existing uncertainties regarding instrumentation and the order in which the fugues should be performed.

When in 1922 Wolfgang Graeser brought "*The Art of the Fugue*" into the limelight of publicity by promoting its first public performance in Leipzig, he did something memorable. Thanks to Graeser, this extraordinary work has taken its place in the public consciousness alongside of Bach's greatest, and a number of practical arrangements have appeared in addition to Graeser's. Orchestration can indeed provide an additional clarity of part-writing together with a variety of tone-color. However Graeser's, and some other arrangers' justification that Bach did not indicate what instruments he intended to use, was erroneous.

The fact that "*The Art of the Fugue*" was originally published in 3- or 4-part open score (most of this work, though left unfinished by Bach, was engraved under his supervision), was no indication that an orchestral, or even a chamber music performance was intended. He did the same, for example, with the six-part Ricercare in "*A Musical Offering*", written for pedal harpsichord or organ. His "*connoisseurs and amateurs*" during the Baroque period were quite accustomed to read from an open score, and indeed an advantage of this system was that the player/student could clearly see the individual voices. Ability to play from open scores remained current until well into the 1800s.

Bach indeed implied without any ambiguity that "*The Art of the Fugue*" was written for the keyboard. Nor had anybody ever doubted this until the appearance of Graeser's edition. As Tovey put it in his edition of this work (Oxford University Press), "*no rule of counterpoint is kept more meticulously by Bach than the confinement of the part-writing to the stretch of two hands throughout.*"

Many serious scholars had already supported this stand. Gill, Husmann, Rietsch, Schmieder, Steglich, to mention only a few, had produced convincing arguments demonstrating beyond all question that "*The Art of the Fugue*" was originally composed for a keyboard instrument, i.e. the harpsichord. The only problem with this assertion is that it is somewhat subjective: it depends on the hand-span of the individual player, for this work does contain a number of chords which the average hands cannot span. However, this applies to other keyboard works by Bach (*The Well-tempered Clavier*, *Sonata in D*, *Aria Variata alla Maniera Italiana*), and in fact historical research has established beyond doubt that Bach's hands were large enough to cope with the spans occurring in "*The Art of the Fugue*".

In his "historic-literary manual of famous personalities" (Leipzig 1794), Hirsching made the following remarks in regard to Bach: "*His fist was enormous. He was able, for instance, to span a twelfth with the left hand, while playing grace notes with the middle fingers.*"

Moreover, Bach's contemporaries and direct descendants classed *The Art of the Fugue* among the important literature for keyboard instruments, a fact discussed in an article entitled "*Fugue*" by Kirnberger in the "*General Theory of the Fine Arts*", edited by J. G. Sulzer (2nd edition, 1792), one of the most popular German books on Art at that time. The author mentions 17 composers of Clavier Fugues, while Bach's "*The Art of the Fugue*" ranks first among the works expressly written for the Clavier.

The German Baroque two-manual Harpsichord, with its 16' 8', 4' and 2' stops would have provided ample scope for "*terrace dynamics*", the movement between manuals or the combination of both, through which the different fugues could be given registration to suit their mood and style, and through which also fugal entries and internal dynamics could be highlighted. In the present performance, the arrangement by Bruno Seidelhofer for Two Pianos allows duplication in the base or top line as well as the highlighting of fugal entries thus replicating the effects possible on a two-manual harpsichord.

The order in which the Fugues (which Bach calls "*Contrapuncti*") were to be performed was likewise left unclear by Bach, though he gave indications in an earlier MS of 1742. Here, Bach arranges the Fugues in order of growing complexity, a process which seems thoroughly logical and in accordance with what might be assumed as Bach's intention. We have interspersed the 4 Canons in order to provide groups of convenient listening length.

Herewith some of the adventures to which a fugal theme can be subjected: It can be combined with itself by *stretto* (overlapping repetition), by *diminution* (halving of the time value), and by *augmentation* (doubling of the time value). It can be inverted and then combined with itself in contrary motion. The Theme itself may also be subjected to minute variations of rhythm or perhaps one single note, in order to provide the opportunities for new harmonic twists. New themes can also be added to combine with the original.

In **Contrapunctus I** the subject on which the entire series will be based is stated without adornment in each of the four voices. In **Contrapunctus II** it is repeated verbatim until the last four even eighth notes, when a new rhythmic figure enters and continues against the second entrance of the theme. In **Contrapunctus III** the theme is inverted and awarded a chromatic counter subject. In **Contrapunctus IV** the inversion provides the substance. The eighth notes are worked into a running figure, heard among the voices inverted alternately, that offers a continuous accompaniment to the repetitions of the subject. So far... relatively simple.

In **Contrapunctus V** the composer begins his demonstration proper with a *stretto-fugue* in contrary motion. In **Contrapunctus VI**, another *stretto-fugue*, the subject is heard not only direct and inverted but also diminished in both forms. In **Contrapunctus VII**, a third *stretto-fugue*, augmentation is added to the diminution. In **Contrapunctus VIII** Bach starts to combine the Main Theme with others. This is a *Triple Fugue* with three strongly contrasted subjects.

In **Contrapunctus IX**, a *Double Fugue*, the Main Theme is combined with a running scale figure bearing the label *alla duodecima*, which means that the principal subject may be introduced a twelfth away from the other in either direction. The figure later recurs as a bass in the extension of augmentation. In **Contrapunctus X**, another *Double Fugue* with the same marking, but with the alternate interval of the tenth prescribed, the doubling of both melodies in sixths and sevenths makes for rich contrapuntal textures. In **Contrapunctus XI**, a *Triple Fugue*, the immediately preceding subjects are inverted and sung in four voices instead of three.

Contrapunctus XII is a quite simple fugue, the wonder is that it can be inverted note for note from start to finish, the whole manuscript turned *up-side-down!* Similarly with the more complex Fugue following. Bach gives to these two pairs the title "Rectus" and "Inversus".

The **Canon** is a remarkably simple device in its basic conception. A single-line melody is begun with one voice; at a specific interval (a tenth, a twelfth etc) as defined by the composer, the second voice comes in with exactly the same melody, then at the same interval again, a third voice repeats, and so on.

Of the three subjects in the *Unfinished Fugue*, the last actually spells out the composer's name; the opening notes are B (flat), A, C, and H (which is B natural in German notation). We know that as far back as his Weimar period (1708-1717) Bach had remarked facetiously that the thematic implications of his family name accounted for the high incidence of musical aptitudes in the household. Though of dubious association with *The Art of The Fugue*, the *Unfinished* has been added since many who enjoy *The Art of the Fugue* are accustomed to hearing it, and it is a fine piece of music in its own right, albeit incomplete.

As to the **Chorale**, the following words are to be found on the inner cover of the original edition, hurriedly prepared by Bach's sons after their Father's death: "*Due to his eye complaint and sudden death, the composer of this work was unable to finish the last fugue, the theme of which features his name (B-A-C-H). To make amends for this shortcoming, we have added, for lovers of Bach's music, the four-part chorale, dictated extempore by the blind master to one of his friends.*" We too end our recording with this beautiful Chorale, made the more poignant by its text: "*Before Thy Throne, Oh Lord, I stand*". Surely a more appropriate text could not be found as the last testimony of a composer whose work and indeed life had been dedicated to the Glory of God – *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Though the appreciation of fugal writing and counterpoint in general was overtaken by the Rococo style of Haydn and Mozart, a comment in Marpurg's "*Treatise on the Fugue*" (1753), provides convincing evidence of what musical circles thought of "*The Art of the Fugue*" shortly after Bach's death: "*The harmony and melody of the themes, the main composition and the inversion in this difficult work, flow as naturally as if it were a free composition.*"

Listeners today may appreciate the intricacies of Bach's contrapuntal expertise, or they may simply sit back and enjoy some very wonderful music, proving what may well have been one of Bach's guiding principles: that when music is so crafted as to reflect the fundamental Order of the Universe, it cannot fail to give pleasure to the listener.