

Uri Golomb

Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Art of Fugue*

In the introduction to his book *Musical Meaning and Emotion*, philosopher Stephen Davies wrote: "I do not believe that all music is expressive. Neither do I believe that expressiveness is always the most important feature of music that is expressive" (p. x). To illustrate this, he presented Bach's *Art of Fugue* as the archetypal example. Here, he claims, is a work in which the listener's attention should be drawn to "the way the material is handled"; the music's "expressive and dynamic features" – or lack thereof – are of marginal importance (p. 354). This view is not atypical. *The Art of Fugue*'s reputation as a cerebral, intellectual work is so pervasive that Rinaldo Alessandrini, in the notes to his recording, was moved to ask: "is it possible to consider *The Art of Fugue* as music?"

Until recently, *The Art of Fugue* was considered Bach's very last work, sketched and written in last years of his life. It thus came to be viewed as Bach's "Last Will and Testament". This resonated with the more general tendency to consider any artist's late works as transcendental, "unworldly" reflections of their creator's spirit. Much was also made of the fact that the work was published with no indication of instrumentation: this was seen as further evidence for Bach's disengagement from material considerations, his indifference to sonority and performance. Some even described *The Art of Fugue* as *Augenmusik* – "eye-music", which should be contemplated and analysed, not realised in sound.

Since its first publication in 1751 (a year after Bach's death), the work was often treated as *Augenmusik*. It was re-published, studied and analysed during the 19th century, but did not receive a complete public performance until 1927, under the direction of then-Thomaskantor Karl Straube. Straube used Wolfgang Graeser's colourful orchestration, which employed a variety of instrumental combinations – from solo harpsichord and organ, through solo strings, to a full orchestra of strings, brass, woodwinds and organ. Such orchestrations helped *The Art of Fugue* to finally reach the concert halls. However, they also strengthened the notion that the work was not bound to any particular instrumentation – thus bolstering, even in listeners' ears, the *Augenmusik* myth.

The work's compositional history

Recent research into *The Art of Fugue's* chronology (especially by Yoshikate Kobayashi and Christoph Wolff) has cast doubt on its "Last Will and Testament" status. Bach probably began composing the work relatively early – between 1738 and 1742. By 1746, he completed the work's first version, consisting of 12 fugues and 2 canons. In 1746-1749 he began preparing it for publication. For this version he added two fugues and two canons, revised several of the older movements, and placed all movements in a new sequence.

When Bach died in 1750, the engraving was only partly finished; the printing work was completed in 1751, under Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's supervision. The edition, as published, did not entirely reflect J. S. Bach's own wishes: the inclusion of two versions of **Contrapunctus 10** is certainly an error, and the publishers included Bach's so-called "Deathbed chorale" ("Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit", BWV 668 – Bach's 1750 revision of his own "Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen" from the Weimar *Orgel-Büchlein*), which has no musical link with *The Art of Fugue*. Some also argue that the last, incomplete fugue does not belong to *The Art of Fugue*, and the title's authenticity has also been questioned.

The *Augenmusik* myth has not fared well in recent scholarship, either – though it does have some basis in fact. The work's aim was, at least in part, pedagogical: students and teachers of composition and performance could use it to understand, and grapple with, the intricacies of counterpoint and its realisation in performance. To be practical, such a work would have to be playable by the student alone, or at least by student and teacher together. *The Art of Fugue* fulfils this condition: most of it is playable on a single keyboard.

Thus, the work was intended more for active performers than for passive listeners. As Charles Rosen puts it, "it is, above all, a work for oneself to play, to feel under one's fingers as well as to hear". The music was printed in an open score, with each voice printed on a separate staff – not an uncommon format for keyboard music in the 17th and 18th centuries. Players could thus easily observe the autonomous character of individual voices, and the way they interact with each other, even when their fingers could not do full justice to these features.

The player's involvement in this process is greater, and more physical, than the *Augenmusik* myth implies. However, the notion that this is players' music still places

The Art of Fugue as the preserve of specialists; it does not dispel the impression that this is a musical-intellectual work, in which craftsmanship and technical accomplishments are more important than sensuous and expressive elements.

The Art of Fugue – An overview

The Art of Fugue is a series of contrapuntal movements, all based on a single theme or variants thereof. Providing a detailed overview of these movements is not easy, as there is some controversy on the order of the pieces, their titles and, in some cases, on whether they belong to the work at all.

The order of the movements is, in any case, of debatable importance. Bach did not conceive the work for a complete, cyclical performance; Bradley Brookshire, in the notes to his forthcoming recording, states: “The reordering of the later version seems to reflect Bach’s concern for lending an agreeable rationalism to the appearance of his planned publication, but does not necessarily speak to performance at all”. This view, if accepted, arguably leaves performers free to re-shuffle the pieces to accomplish the most varied and interesting performance sequence, without fearing authorial censure. On a CD, the question becomes even less important: individual listeners can re-programme the pieces to form the sequence that they find, at that particular moment, the most satisfactory.

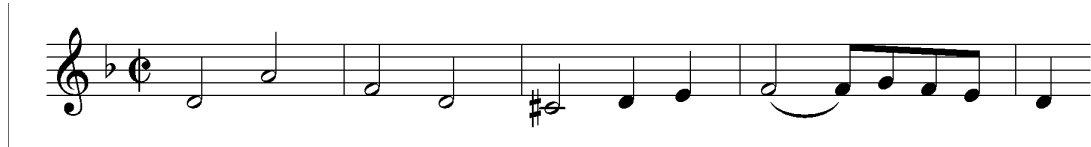
This is not to say that the order of the movements is arbitrary or unimportant. In each version, the movements are arranged to form a more-or-less steady progression from simple to complex – an arrangement which certainly makes pedagogical sense, and arguably also contributes to an effective performance sequence. The early version focuses attention on the transformation of thematic materials; the later version groups the fugues according to their sub-genres.

The list below is based on the assumption that the order of the first 11 pieces in the 1751 edition reflects Bach’s intentions (as argued by Christoph Wolff and Richard Jones, among others). The classification of fugues into sub-genres matches the categories proposed by the 18th-century theorist Mattheson, as applied to *The Art of Fugue* in Laurence Dreyfus’s “Matters of Kind” (the fifth chapter of his book *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*). All fugues are in four parts, unless otherwise indicated. The numbering corresponds to Richard Jones’s edition; other editions and

performances might employ different numbering, especially for Contrapuncti 12-14 and the canons.

Contrapuncti 1-4: Simple fugues

The designation “simple fugue” means that each fugue is based on only one subject, which appears without notable alterations. **Contrapunctus 1** presents the subject in its simple version:



In **Contrapunctus 2**, the subject is rhythmically altered;



in **Contrapuncti 3 and 4**, it is inverted.



Contrapuncti 5-7: Counter-fugues

In these fugues, different variants of the subject appear simultaneously, playing against one another. These fugues are also referred to as “stretto fugues”, since the voices enter in quick succession – whereas in the simple fugues, each voice makes its initial entry only after the preceding voice stated the entire subject.

In **Contrapunctus 5**, the subject and its inversion are juxtaposed. In **Contrapunctus 6**, the subject appears in inversion and diminution; **Contrapunctus 7** is titled “per Augmentationem et Diminutionem”, but features inversion as well.

Contrapuncti 8-11: Double and Triple fugues

In these fugues, the subject – or one of its variants – is joined by one or two additional subjects in invertible counterpoint (that is, lower and upper parts are exchanged without contravening the rules of harmony).

Contrapunctus 8 is a triple fugue in three parts; **Contrapuncti 9 and 10** are double fugues. **Contrapunctus 9** is “alla Duodecima”: that is, one of the two subjects “is moved above or below the other by transposing it up or down a 12th” (Richard

Jones). This means that the interval relationship between the two subjects changes: in some entries, they begin an octave apart, while in others they begin a fifth apart. **Contrapunctus 10** is “alla Decima” – here, the subject is transposed up or down a 10th. “This species of double counterpoint allows either or both subjects to be doubled in 3rds, 6ths or 10ths” (Jones) – that is, while one voice plays one of the fugue’s subjects, two other parts present the other subject simultaneously in two different pitches.

Contrapunctus 11 is a triple fugue in four parts, based on the same three subjects as **Contrapunctus 8**. However, by inverting one of these subjects, Bach surreptitiously introduces his own name (the musical notes B \flat -A-C-B \sharp – which, in German musical nomenclature, spell out the name BACH) in the second entry (see bars 90-91).

Contrapuncti 12-13: Mirror Fugues

Each of these fugues is completely invertible, by changing the disposition of the voices and simultaneously inverting each part. The sources contradict each other as to which version is “rectus” (the right-way-up version) and which is “inversus” (the upside-down version).

Contrapunctus 12 is in four parts. **Contrapunctus 13** exists in two versions: a three-part fugue, ostensibly for one keyboard; and a version for two keyboards, to which Bach added a fourth, independent part. The 1751 edition includes both versions, although there is some debate as to whether Bach intended to include the two-keyboard version.

Most keyboard players find both these Contrapuncti difficult, if not impossible, to play with two hands on a single keyboard. Therefore, several players either bring in “reinforcement” – an additional player to play with them on a second harpsichord or piano – or use over-dubbing to record these movements with themselves.

The four canons

Although these are pieces in strict counterpoint, and based on *The Art of Fugue*’s subject, some scholars are not sure whether they form part of *The Art of Fugue*. Richard Jones suggests that Bach might have intended to place them at the end of the book, as an appendix. Their order is not firmly established; in Jones’s edition,

they are arranged according to the same principle as the fugues – that is, by increasing complexity.

In this arrangement, the first canon is the **Canon alla Ottava**. Then follows the **Canon all Decima in Contrapunto alla Terza**. This consists of two continuous, dovetailing canons: first, “the second voice starts a tenth higher”, then “the same music is repeated, except that the lower voice is now the upper one, and they start only an octave apart” (Charles Rosen). The following **Canon alla Duodecima in Contrapunto alla Quinta** follows a similar principle. At first, the two parts enter a fifth apart – lower voice in tonic, upper voice in dominant; then halfway through they change positions, and the canon is repeated, this time with both voices in the tonic.

Finally, there comes a **Canon per Augmentationem in Contrario Muto** (canon in augmentation and inversion). First, the bass imitates the soprano – upside-down and at half the speed; then the two parts are reversed.

Contrapunctus 14: Triple/Quadruple Fugue (incomplete)

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote that his father had died while composing this fugue. Recent research, however, suggests that Bach abandoned this movement several months before his death. His failure to complete it thus remains a mystery; Christoph Wolff suggests that Bach completed it in another manuscript, now lost.

As it stands, this fugue is based on three subjects – including one based on the notes of Bach’s own name, but excluding *The Art of Fugue*’s subject. Several prominent writers therefore claim that it is wholly unrelated to *The Art of Fugue*. However, *The Art of Fugue*’s subject can be combined with this fugue’s three subjects (the following illustration is derived from Richard Jones’s edition):

"Art of Fugue" subject

Subject II

Subject III

Subject I

B A C

H

In all probability, then, Bach intended this to be a **quadruple** fugue, but abandoned it before introducing its last subject. Several musicians have tried to complete it, to prove that a quadruple fugue is feasible and to provide a more satisfying conclusion for this movement, which – as it stands – ends in midstream. The Delmé Quartet recorded the completion by Donald Francis Tovey; organist Helmut Walcha and harpsichordist Davitt Moroney recorded their own completions.

***The Art of Fugue* as sounding music**

As the technical survey above shows, *The Art of Fugue* consists entirely of increasingly complex contrapuntal movements. There are no equivalents to the

preludes in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* or the Trio Sonata in the *Musical Offering*, which offer (ostensibly) a relief from the rigours of strict polyphony. This led Charles Rosen to describe *The Art of Fugue* as uniquely “sober and austere”; before this, he claims, Bach had not written anything “in which his art was so naked”. Paul Epstein (in the notes to the Emerson Quartet’s recording) hears it as “embodying divine order”, bringing to mind “natural forms, the growth of cells or crystals, or the deep structures of psychology”; Alberto Basso (in the notes to Alessandrini’s recording) considers it “none other than the sublime expression of a scientific investigation aimed at capturing perfection”. These exalted visions project *The Art of Fugue* as something unapproachable, remote from expressive and sensuous immediacy.

Others, however, insist that Bach’s achievement is not primarily technical. Jordi Savall, for instance, writes that the *Musical Offering* and *The Art of Fugue* “overcome the most rigorous challenges, whilst never sacrificing the expressive quality and musical eloquence which, even in his most elaborate and complex passages, provide the unbroken thread of Bach’s musical discourse”. Others go even further, claiming that expressive eloquence characterises Bach’s music **especially** at its most elaborate and complex: his most polyphonic music is often also his most expressively intense.

Part of the debate concerns the nature of internal relationships in Bach’s polyphony – his supposed reconciliation of harmony (which is easiest to achieve when the voices are mutually subordinate) and polyphony (which ideally demands autonomy for each voice). The identification of polyphony with order implies a peaceful co-existence, a lack of drama or struggle. In this vision, the only emotions that might be admitted are inner peace, or awe and devotion. Yet there are those who claim that Bach’s strength and greatness rely exactly on the opposite tendencies. The most blatant formulation, perhaps, comes in Ernst Kurth’s 1917 treatise *Grundlagen des linearen Kontrapunktes* (*Foundations of Linear Counterpoint*). In Kurth’s view, internal tension is at the heart of Bach’s polyphony. Bach “allows every global unfoldment to emerge clearly as a struggle, and often a very urgent resistance, against the local dynamic in the motives of opposing tendencies”. Those composers – such as Bach’s 19th-century imitators – who sought to create polyphony devoid of such internal struggles ended up with facile music, in which the polyphony sounded “too easy, too passive” (translation from Lee Rothfarb’s *Ernst Kurth: Selected Writings*, p. 72).

It should also be remembered that the arousal of emotional responses was central to Baroque musical aesthetics – and there is little reason to believe that Bach would have relinquished this aim in *The Art of Fugue*. As Laurence Dreyfus writes, in the notes to his recording with the viol consort Phantasm:

for many of Bach's contemporaries, the learned devices of fugue were no longer considered 'art' so much as intellectual vanity far removed from the requirements of 'natural' music. 'Mind games' (Sinnenspiel), writes Johann Mattheson, 'cannot appeal to affects', and he knows of no one who can assert that strict counterpoint 'has moved his heart, stirred this or that affect or has been in one way or the other to his liking. As long as this has not happened, one has accomplished nothing in music.' The title of Bach's collection suggests that his goal was very much to assert the status of fugue as musical 'art' (Kunst) rather than merely artifice (Künstlichkeit) and that the deeply moving result was to appeal not only to the mind and to the eye but most particularly to the ear.

In recent years, critics and performers alike have become increasingly alert to those elements in Bach's music which ensure its "appeal to the ear" – and, one might add, to the heart. The most general observation that can be made in this context is that *The Art of Fugue* is rich in tense and intense chromaticism and dissonance. For the most part, its intensity is cumulative – as one might expect in a predominantly polyphonic work, in which different voices reach their expressive apex at different times. This creates what the musicologist Dalia Cohen calls "non-concurrence", which occurs "when one factor changes in the direction of increased tension, [whilst] the other changes in the direction of relaxation or increase of stability".¹ Such non-concurrence is, in itself, a potential source of tension and unease, as Bach reveals in much of his polyphonic music: he creates, prolongs and intensifies tension by shifting the emphasis from one part to another (with frequent overlaps), drawing on non-concurrence between them and deliberately postponing harmonic resolution.

There are also some startlingly dramatic **moments** in *The Art of Fugue* – such as the literally arresting fermatas towards the end of **Contrapunctus 1**. Here, the music switches suddenly to a chordal texture, highlighting several dissonant chords, before returning to a more flowing counterpoint for the final resolution.

Nor is the music unremittingly serious and contemplative. A potential for lightness, even playfulness, exists in several of the canons, and in **Contrapunctus 13**

¹ "Palestrina Counterpoint: A Musical Expression of Unexcited Speech". *Journal of Music Theory* 15 (1971): 101.

(especially in its two-keyboard version); whilst the virtuosity of **Contrapunctus 9** can give rise to dramatic ferocity.

A sense of internal struggle can also be sensed in several guises. It is interesting to cite, in this context, Dreyfus's interpretation of **Contrapunctus 6**, which Bach titled "in stylo Francese". This term associates the dotted rhythms in this movement with the style of the French overture. These overtures' opening, dotted sections, however, are usually homophonic. By juxtaposing the dotted subject with its own diminution, Bach simultaneously presents two incompatible dotted patterns (♩. ♩ and ♩. ♩). The result, in Dreyfus's view, is

an utterly mad evocation of a French overture which literally decomposes into sets of majestic gestures posturing at incompatible velocities. (For this reason, we don't assimilate the rhythms of the augmentations to the faster moving themes – turning quavers into semi-quavers [♩. ♩] – but rather reinforce what seems what seems to be Bach's intentionally wild metric conflict.) The kind of majesty Bach is representing here is therefore far more speculative than the kind concerned merely with vain monuments to worldly glory.

As Dreyfus's parenthetical comment demonstrates, views on the music's expressive character can have direct impact on its realisation in performance – and *vice versa*. The notion of counterpoint as pure order, for example, might lead to a different type of performance – more concerned with perfect alignment – than the notion of counterpoint as dialogue, or even conflict, which can lead performers to allow – even demand – a degree of non-alignment, of subtle lack of co-ordination, between lines, in order to emphasise their independence. This touches upon one of the most common controversies surrounding *The Art of Fugue* – that of scoring and instrumentation.

Medium and message

The work's playability on the keyboard has received two different interpretations. The "exclusive" interpretation considers *The Art of Fugue* a keyboard work. In its most restrictive interpretation (for example, in Gustav Leonhardt's essay, re-printed in the notes to his Deutsche Harmonia Mundi recording), it claims that the work must be rendered on the harpsichord; performing it in any other medium would constitute a direct violation of Bach's intentions. Charles Rosen, defending his choice to perform the work on the piano, proposes a more liberal interpretation: the work was published for domestic use, and Bach expected it to be played on whatever keyboard instrument the purchaser happened to possess.

The “inclusive” interpretation claims that, “although Bach wrote the *Art of Fugue* so that most of it was playable by one person seated at a keyboard, it is not, strictly speaking, a keyboard work” (Dreyfus, notes to Phantasm recording). If *The Art of Fugue* had not been playable on the keyboard, its value as a pedagogical tool would have been severely diminished. By this reasoning, however, Bach was not thinking primarily in terms of keyboard sound and technique: his main aim was compositional instruction, not instrumental tuition.

Even if Bach himself did not envisage an ensemble performance, this should not necessarily deter present-day arrangers. After all, the very act of playing the work from beginning to end in a single concert probably goes beyond Bach’s intentions: it takes a work which was originally intended for fellow-musicians to play and study at their leisure, and presents it as a continuous sequence to a passive audience consisting, at least in part, of non-musicians. Some musicians therefore believe that it would be wrong-headed to insist that such a performance must employ the original performance medium (that is, a single keyboard instrument): after all, the **purpose** of the work has already been altered.

Thus, an ensemble performance, even if anachronistic, might still be a valid option for today’s musical life. An ensemble of several players would find it easier to give independent shaping to each of the contrapuntal lines, thus bringing to life the sense of polyphonic dialogue – and tension – that is at the heart of this work; it would ensure greater clarity, helping the audience to hear what the intended performer-listener would have seen and imagined. If the ensemble is heterogeneous – consisting of a mix of winds and strings – the arrangement could also ensure a variety of timbres.

Others would counter, of course, that listeners should be expected to make the effort to retain interest and concentration – the performers should not do all the work for them. As András Schiff puts it (in reference to the *Goldberg Variations*), “Great music is never too long. It is certain listeners’ patience that is too short”. Additionally, an arrangement which insists on spelling out everything could result in a performance of exaggerated clarity. Even pianists do not always resist the temptation to obtrusively highlight the subject in each and every appearance (even when Bach deliberately concealed its entries); with orchestration, the opportunities – and therefore the temptation – to do this are even greater. In Charles Rosen’s words,

complete independence of the voices [...] is far from an unmixed blessing: the blending and mingling of voices, so that one seems to run into the other and to

become a decorative part of its line while still retaining some of its own individuality – this half-blending, half-independence which is one of the central traits of the style of the *Art of Fugue*, is most easily heard when played on a keyboard instrument.

This kind of partial clarity is indeed achieved by Rosen on the piano (Sony Classical; see discography), as well as by harpsichordists like Gustav Leonhardt and Robert Hill (Hänssler; see discography): through subtle manipulation of rhythm, articulation and (on the piano) dynamics, they successfully convey the sense of complexity, dialogue and interchange without resorting to the kind of audible analysis that many listeners would find intrusive in orchestral arrangements. However, similar results have been achieved by ensembles of uniform tone colour, such as the Juilliard String Quartet (Sony Classical) or viol consorts like Phantasm (Simax) and Fretwork (Harmonia Mundi).

Even questions of clarity and variety depend on the character of the interpretation, no less than on the chosen medium. Musicians who believe that the work's rigorous complexity should be reflected in a severe, "objective" performance can project their view in any medium – be it solo keyboard (for example, organist Helmut Walcha on Archiv Produktion), chamber ensemble (for example, the Emerson Quartet on Deutsche Grammophon) or orchestra (for example, Karl Münchinger on Decca).

The converse view can also be realised in a variety of media. Harpsichordist Bradley Brookshire, for example, states that "the forces of integration" in *The Art of Fugue* – its thematic and tonal unity, its constant employment of contrapuntal textures – are so strong that they need not be emphasised in performance; instead, the work "permits a relatively fanciful performance". In his forthcoming recording, he vividly demonstrates that such an interpretation is eminently achievable on a single harpsichord.

Brookshire's performance resembles no other harpsichord rendition in its range of colours and articulation, and in its varied approach to tempo – ranging from near-metronomic rigidity (especially in the mirror fugues) to generous rubati (notable right from **Contrapunctus 1**). This reflects Brookshire's view that "the variety of styles and genres that Bach has pulled out of a small amount of thematic material" is the "most essential feature" of *The Art of Fugue*. Brookshire also goes further than any other harpsichordist in deliberately de-synchronising supposedly simultaneous notes

in order to “create the sense that each individual line in the contrapuntal texture was being performed by a separate individual in musical conversation with other individuals”; in other words, he attempts to simulate an ensemble on a single keyboard. The resulting performance can give rise to strong contradictory reactions; even a single listener might find it mannered and contrived at one moment – and moving and revelatory at the next. In this sense, Brookshire is surprisingly similar to Hermann Scherchen, whose 1964 orchestral version alternates stark, unyielding severity in some movements with high drama in others.

Even the use of an actual ensemble, however, is not sufficient to achieve an independent shaping for each line. Notwithstanding my earlier reference to the Juilliard Quartet, the greatest sense of dialogue is achieved by chamber ensembles on period instruments – most notably Musica Antiqua Köln (Archiv Produktion), Concerto Italiano (Opus 111/Naïve; see discography) and Phantasm. These players, accustomed to historically-informed performance, adopt a type of rhetorical phrasing, which subtly enlivens the contours and motivic structure of individual phrases, thus giving each line an independent character and enlivening the complex interrelationship – calm, playful or tense – between the voices in the contrapuntal discourse. In addition, their varied articulation – ranging from short, gently-separated legati to sharp incisions – and their sensitivity to metric accentuation generate a sense of movement and momentum.

Other ensembles, however, generate a more consistently serious, reflective atmosphere. Again, the distinction between an “original” keyboard performance and an arrangement for ensemble is of little importance. Gustav Leonhardt on the harpsichord, Jordi Savall and Hespèrion XX (Alia Vox; see discography), the viol consort Fretwork, and the Delmé Quartet (Hyperion) present performances of great subtlety and flexibility – which seem, however, to deliberately avoid drama, playfulness and virtuosity.

Hespèrion XX and Fretwork represent what might be termed backward anachronism – performing *The Art of Fugue* with instruments that have largely fallen out of use in Bach’s time. This choice ties in with the notion that *The Art of Fugue* itself owes more to the supposedly contemplative, introverted traditions of Renaissance polyphony than to the more extroverted Baroque style.

An exceptionally striking statement of this position comes from Glenn Gould:

Bach was writing this music against *every possible tendency* of the time. He had renounced the kinds of modulatory patterns he himself had used successfully six or seven years earlier in the “Goldberg” Variations and in book 2 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and was writing in a lighter, less clearly defined early-baroque/late-Renaissance manner. It was as though he was saying to the world, “I don’t *care* anymore; there are no more Italian Concertos in me; *this* is what I’m about!” (*Glenn Gould Reader*, p. 460)

Ironically, Hespèrion XX’s and Fretwork’s performances convey this message more vividly than Gould’s often pointillistic readings (Sony Classical). This is particularly notable in their rendition of the canons – movements that are often considered the most specifically idiomatic to the keyboard. Several arrangers – from Wolfgang Graeser and Hermann Scherchen to Reinhardt Goebel and Rinaldo Alessandrini – allocated them to keyboard instruments.

Rendered on the harpsichord, the rapid passage work – especially in the **Canon alla Ottava** and the **Canon alla Duodecima**, as well as **Contrapunctus 13** – is reminiscent of toccatas in its virtuosity. As David Yearsley puts it,

Bach allows glitter and substance to reside within the same musical material, and be heard on the same level. The canons are the most contrapuntally rigorous pieces in the *Art of Fugue*, while at the same time being the most superficially brilliant. In this way they dramatize the tension between thinking and playing, between reflection and action: virtuosic flamboyance becomes the byproduct of contrapuntal mechanism. (*Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint*, p. 205)

The effect on a consort of viols (or, in Hespèrion XX’s case, a mix of viols and winds) is quite different, especially given the musicians’ rounded phrasing and restrained dynamics. Much of the surface “glitter” is replaced by a more introverted, contemplative atmosphere, in line with their rendering of the rest of the work.

This is not to suggest that a Renaissance instrumentarium, in and of itself, dictates an introspective approach: Phantasm, under Laurence Dreyfus’s direction, projects *The Art of Fugue* with palpable tension and momentum (though this version omits the canons altogether, as does Robert Simpson’s arrangement for the Delmé Quartet). Ultimately, then, the musicians’ detailed approach to the music – their tempo, dynamics, articulation and so forth – is at least as important in determining the interpretation’s character as their choice of instrumental hardware.

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This article has only touched upon the tip (or perhaps several tips) of the iceberg. A complete performance by a fine musician or ensemble does much more

than that, of course; and ultimately it might be true that, for complete appreciation of this work, one must at least attempt to read it for oneself. At the very least, one cannot settle for just one interpretation. The music's myriad complexities, its near-miraculous combination of scientific erudition and expressive intensity, cannot be exhausted by one approach or through one medium.

Uri Golomb

The Art of Fugue – selected discography

Introduction

Choosing four recordings of *The Art of Fugue* is an almost impossible task: it does not allow a reviewer to do justice to the work's vast and varied discography. In compiling the list below, I was forced to omit several fine performances, such as those by Fretwork on Harmonia Mundi and by Reinhardt Goebel's Musica Antiqua Köln on Archiv Produktion. I especially regret the omission of the Juilliard Quartet's version on Sony Classical, which shares many of the virtues of Charles Rosen's solo piano reading on the same label.

Gustav Leonhardt's contemplative and transparent reading on Deutsche Harmonia Mundi was omitted due to incompleteness: Leonhardt believes that **Contrapunctus 14** is not part of *The Art of Fugue*, and consequently omits it from his recording. Similarly, Laurence Dreyfus, leader-director of the viol consort Phantasm, judged the canons and mirror fugues as "not especially suited to performance on viols"; they are therefore omitted from that ensemble's profoundly lucid and expressive performance on Simax. Hermann Scherchen's orchestral version on Millennium Classics – always remarkably transparent, and often compellingly dramatic – is currently unavailable. Conversely, Bradley Brookshire's thought-provoking harpsichord version, which I was fortunate to hear on a review copy, has not yet been released. Brookshire plans to publish it in conjunction with an interactive CD-ROM, featuring "a score, a full analysis, a host of interactive tutorials addressing the subject of Bach's counterpoint, and an annotated bibliography"; this should greatly enhance the value and attraction of his performance.

Choosing a single "critic's choice" is also very difficult; no single performance of this work can tell the whole story, and I believe every listener should possess at least one keyboard version and one ensemble version. The list below should be read with these reservations in mind.

Charles Rosen (piano)

CD 2 in *Bach: The Keyboard Album*. 74:23 min. (CD 1 features *The Italian Concerto* and short works by Bach and Telemann, performed by Rosalyn Tureck; 65:44 min).

Recorded 1967; re-issued 1997.

Sony Classical SB2K 63231

Five stars

This magnificent performance originally formed part of a 3-LP album which also included the *Goldberg Variations* and the two ricercars from the *Musical Offering*. Sony's ill-conceived CD re-issue disengages *The Art of Fugue* from its intended coupling (instead, we get an unrelated recital by Rosalyn Tureck), and omits the thoughtful, lucid and detailed essay which Rosen contributed to the original album.

This remains, however, the finest rendition of *The Art of Fugue* on the piano, making subtle yet effective use of the instrument's resources. Rosen's tempi are mostly on the fast side; but, thanks to his rounded sonorities and subtle phrasing, they rarely sound rushed. There are few localised dramatic gestures – even **Contrapunctus 9** is rendered with subtle delicacy, not electrifying virtuosity.

Rosen's interpretation combines expressive refinement and analytic insight: he deftly exposes contrapuntal details, and shapes patterns of tension and resolution with compelling precision. However, there is never a sense of intrusive point-making; instead, Rosen projects his analysis-in-sound through nuanced inflections of tempo, timbre, dynamics and articulation, creating the illusion that the music speaks for itself.

Hespèrion XX/ Jordi Savall (viola da gamba)

Alia Vox AV 9818 A + B.

2 CDs; 45:28 min + 46:57 min.

Recorded 1986; re-issued 2001

Five stars

Savall's scoring of *The Art of Fugue* is deliberately archaic. The viol consort is, in Savall's words, "an ensemble for which the largest repertoire of contrapuntal

chamber music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was composed” – but it was largely defunct by Bach’s lifetime. Savall additionally used “a consort of four wind instruments of the period”. Two of these, however, are also archaic: Bach employed cornetti and sackbuts primarily to double vocal lines in *stile antico* choral movements.

As I noted in my article, this scoring ties in with the common view that *The Art of Fugue* itself has more connections with Renaissance polyphony than with the Baroque. This view is also reflected in the melancholy, introspective spirit which informs the performance itself. Savall and his colleagues largely opt for long, *legato* phrases, slow-to-moderate tempi and a narrow dynamic range.

In terms of sheer sound, this is one the most beautiful performances of *The Art of Fugue* it has been my pleasure to hear (notwithstanding occasional moments of shaky intonation). The players shape their lines with acute sensitivity, allowing both textural clarity and the gradual emergence of the music’s cumulative intensity.

The result is a distinctly introverted, non-dramatic yet compellingly expressive view of *The Art of Fugue*. The music’s “enormous emotional content”, its ability “to move even listeners who have no knowledge of the rules of counterpoint” (Savall), is communicated with subtlety and refinement, demanding and inviting close, attentive listening.

The performance is also available as part of a boxed set entitled “Bach’s Testament” (Alia Vox AV9819 A/C), where it is coupled with Savall’s superb performance of the *Musical Offering*.

Concerto Italiano/ Rinaldo Alessandrini (harpsichord)

CD 1 in Naïve Tête à Tête OP 200 11 (CD 2 features Bach keyboard concerti with the same performers)

74:27 min.

Recorded 1998; re-issued 2003.

Five stars

Critic’s choice

This version features a chamber ensemble – four winds, four strings and harpsichord. Alessandrini’s stated purpose was to present *The Art of Fugue* as “music

to listen to". His quest for variety and contrast is reflected in his varied instrumentation, and (more importantly) in the performance's expressive range.

The one consistent feature is the constant inflection of articulation, dynamics and accentuation; Bach's counterpoint is projected as an active and often animated conversation between individuals. In **Contrapunctus 11**, for example, the juxtaposition of the opening subject's brisk, sharp incisiveness with the more languid shaping of other materials creates a sense of drama rarely encountered in other renditions.

Throughout, there is a clear sense of direction and momentum, both locally (within each phrase and each voice) and globally. To some extent, this even applies to the work as a whole. Broad *legato* phrasing, and rich, soft sonorities, are employed with increasing frequency as the work progresses. Two expressive peaks are the richly-scored, melancholy reading of **Contrapunctus 6**, flowing despite its relatively slow tempo – and the concluding, string-quartet rendition of **Contrapunctus 14**, lyrical and unhurried despite its fast tempo.

This recording is currently available as part of a 2-for-1 set, coupled with Alessandrini's exhilarating reading of four Bach keyboard concerti. This version is poorly documented, omitting the list of players and the two original essays (by Alberto Basso and by Alessandrini himself). However, these should eventually be posted on Naïve's evolving website.

Robert Hill (harpsichord)

Hänssler Edition Bachakademie 90.134

2 CDs; 47:13 min + 56:51 min

recorded and released 1998

four stars

This album – volume 143 in Hänssler's edition of Bach's complete *oeuvre* – is the most complete recording of *The Art of Fugue*, featuring an appendix with alternative authentic versions of Contrapuncti 1, 2, 3, 10 and 13. The suspicion that this is a literalistic edition-in-sound might be exacerbated by Robert Hill's decision to perform the work on an Italian-style, single-manual harpsichord (in the mirror fugues,

he is joined by Michael Behringer on a similar instrument). “This uniform tone colour”, writes Hill, “is like a homogeneous thread running through the individual movements”. Hill’s tempi, too, tend to avoid extremes. I found the result somewhat tiring for continuous listening. Listening to individual movements or short sequences, however, I was able to derive much pleasure from this performance’s considerable refinement and vitality.

Hill’s varied phrasing, lively ornamentation, understated rhythmic flexibility, and discreet application of de-synchronised entries, ensure both textural clarity and a palpable if subtle sense of purpose and direction. The prevailing mood is of noble, unhurried flow, but there are departures in both directions – from the regal severity of **Contrapunctus 6** to the light-headed, almost perky rendition of **Contrapunctus 13**. The recorded sound is on the dry side, but does not dampen the harpsichord’s natural resonance.

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