The Art of Fugue

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This is a book of commentaries on selected Bach fugues—“essays in musical analysis and appreciation,” one might call them, to enlarge on the title of Donald Francis Tovey’s famous Essays in Musical Analysis. The fugues are keyboard fugues, written for clavichord, harpsichord, and organ. About half of them come from the two books of The Well-Tempered Clavier (WTC), the other half from a variety of other sources, some of them less familiar: Bach’s comprehensive keyboard publication Clavierübung (Keyboard Practice), Die Kunst der Fuge (The Art of Fugue), the English Suites, and other manuscript sources. The music stems from all periods of Bach’s career except for the earliest. The Chromatic Fantasy dates most probably from his Weimar years, around 1715, and the two contrapuncti from The Art of Fugue reached their definitive form when Bach revised the work just before his death in 1750.

Annotations of any extent on Bach fugues are hard to find outside of the technical literature, and I have taken the time to do justice, as best I can, to these short but very rich pieces. The
discussion is geared to individual segments and bars within the fugues, so readers will need the sheet music with the bars numbered. Most of those who come to this book will already own copies of the *WTC*, the source of many of the pieces, and some of the other selections too. This book includes scores of all but two of the works discussed in detail. [Two scores from *Die Kunst der Fuge, BWV 1080* that were part of the original edition are not included here.—Ed.]

Also included are performances of five of the fugues discussed below, specially recorded for this book by Davitt Moroney and Karen Rosenak.

One inspiration for the present work was Tovey, whose lapidary and marvelous annotations to his edition of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* are classics. First published in 1924, they were reprinted in 1994 to accompany an authoritative new musical text of the *WTC*, prepared by Richard Jones. As a publication of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, Tovey’s contribution was appropriately didactic; his annotations read like a piano teacher’s docket of instructions about touch, fingering, ornaments, and so on, for every place that needs them. But his instructions always rest on his understanding of the music, and what he has to say about that makes, or should make, his commentaries required reading for anyone interested in the fugues, not only students. My purpose is critical, not didactic. I write about reading and listening to fugues, not performing them—listening to them and understanding them.

Another inspiration for me was not a text but a musical anthology, *Bach: The Fugue*, an elegant collection of nine fugues, some with preludes, edited by Charles Rosen for the Oxford
Keyboard Classics in 1975. We have not a few items in common. There are profound words in Rosen’s introduction:

The “pure” fugue, the meditative fugue, is basically a keyboard work for Bach. Of course the fugal texture can be adapted to many forms: the dance, the concerto, the aria, the chorale-prelude. But the fugue toute court . . . is almost without exception conceived for keyboard in the early eighteenth century. Only the performer at the keyboard is in a position to appreciate the movement of the voices, their blending and their separation, their interaction and their contrasts. A fugue of Bach can be fully understood only by the one who plays it, not only heard but felt through the muscles and nerves. Part of the essential conception of the fugue is the way in which voices that the fingers can feel to be individual and distinct are heard as part of an inseparable harmony. The confusion of vertical and horizontal movement is one of the delights of fugue.

And again:

The keyboard fugue, for Bach, is essentially private. . . . The proper instrument is what one has at home: harpsichord, clavichord, organ or piano. There are few of these fugues that exploit the resources of any particular instrument; many would go equally well with sonorities as different as organ and clavichord.

What I have in my home is a piano, and I expect most readers of this book will be pianists too. The music in the recordings is played on all of these instruments.

The fugues that I have selected are, to me, also select; the commentaries attempt to convey something of what makes them particularly beautiful, powerful, intriguing, witty, or moving. This can only be done, I believe, by following the music closely, seeing, hearing, and Rosen would say feeling how the melodic lines are shaped and combined, how the harmonies unfold, and
how time spans are articulated. My hope is to reach the broadest range of musicians: not only performing artists—harpsichordists and pianists—students, and musicologists, but also amateur players: home pianists who have often found themselves drawn to Bach over the years, often to pieces they have known for as long as they can remember, and whose deep pleasure in them is not blunted too much by cautious tempos, uneven articulation, or even a certain amount of stumbling. This community is said to be dead or dying, but I reckon the reports are exaggerated.

The technical level of my discussions will not be high enough for some professionals. I hope it will not seem unduly high to amateurs. At a few points where the discussion gets detailed I format the text in smaller type with bullets. It is not possible to deal properly with fugue without employing technical language—a language in which anyone who has had music lessons is already a beginning speaker. We know words for pitch and rhythm, chord and key, if not for stretto and inversion (yet). A glossary has been carefully compiled to explain technical concepts and exemplify them, by means of bar numbers in the scores. For intrepid readers the glossary can serve as a self-tutor.

The commentaries are independent and can be read separately. The first two can also be read as a pair laying out the basic facts of fugue.

No commentary is provided on the preludes that introduce many of the fugues discussed below, or the fantasy from the Fantasy and Fugue in A Minor. Fugue is the topic here; the Prelude in E-flat Major from the WTC, book 1, is discussed only because it includes, exceptionally, a fugue (an exceptional fugue). This lacuna will seem to some a dereliction, even an outrage, and no doubt a more methodical author would have made it his business to “cover” the preludes. Or a less self-indulgent one; having
written several books about entire repertories before, this time I only wanted to write about music that engages me wholly, and that I feel I can write about effectively. I chose my fugues. Bach chose the preludes.

But scores for the preludes and the A-Minor Fantasia are available, like the fugues, so one can see them, study them, and play them together with their fugues. Some can also be heard among the recordings (tracks 1, 5, and 7).

NOTE

Clarifying marks are used when melodic lines and progressions are indicated by letters in the text:
- directional arrows ↗ and ↘ for larger leaps
- the stroke | for barlines
- the mark ∫ for sequences

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\begin{align*}
\text{A} & \rightarrow \text{G} & \text{G} & \rightarrow \text{D} & \text{D} & \rightarrow \text{A} \\
\text{F} & \rightarrow \text{F} & \text{E} & \rightarrow \text{E} & \text{C} & \rightarrow \text{B} & \text{B} & \rightarrow \text{A}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{G} & \rightarrow \text{C} & \text{A} & \rightarrow \text{D}
\end{align*}
\]