The Art of Fugue

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Published by University of California Press

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This appears to be one of the fugues that did not make the cut for *The Well-Tempered Clavier* when Bach reviewed earlier materials, in the early 1720s, as a first step in planning his project. It is a slight piece, no doubt, but amusing and clever—though cleverness is not the same thing as sophistication, and there is a certain impudence about it that probably would have ruled it out in any case. Bach is certainly willing to embrace comedy as well as the grander modes of expression, but only high comedy finds its way into the *WTC*.

On the matter of sophistication: a fugue subject of any length in uninterrupted sixteenth notes was thoroughly old-fashioned by this time, though Bach had written many in youthful compositions. Example 2 shows the subjects of an early fugue in A minor and another fughetta that Bach copied into the *Clavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, the little study book he began compiling for his oldest son in 1720. This fughetta is numbered 953 in the Schmieder catalog of Bach’s works (BWV 953); our piece is BWV 952. The works are quite similar, and young
piano students ever since have known them both from the collections of Little Preludes and Fugues issued by various publishers. These fughetta subjects can seem like throwbacks, especially that of BWV 953, a weaker piece all around.

Still, viewed differently, the brevity and a certain rhythmic quirk in the subject of BWV 952 hint at a spoof of those old-fashioned straggling subjects, for those in the know. On this view, the subject counts as the first of an almost breathless string of witticisms or antics coming up in this little composition. The rhythmic quirk arises from a slightly irregular accent thrown by an upbeat figure onto an even beat of the bar, beat 2 of the subject’s first bar, in conjunction with regular accents on the odd beats, beat 3 of this bar and beats 1 and 3 of the next.

That upbeat figure, an ascending fourth filled in by sixteenth notes, is the key motivic element in BWV 952 (see example 3a). It functions in a lively passage of preparation for the strong cadence

Listen to Fughetta in C Major, BWV 952, here: http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/luminos.1.3
in bar 8. It returns with new piquancy at the second appearance of this passage at the end of the composition, as we will see.

One can even spot the figure as early as bars 3–6, in the slow countersubject, where it can be seen to be inverted and with its sixteenth notes augmented to eighths (see example 3b) . . . though with material as neutral and as impoverished as this, no one is likely to take such thematic derivations seriously (that is, as something with serious aesthetic consequence). In fact as the music proceeds, the eighth-note figure—a filled-in *descending* fourth—is mostly replaced by a different eighth-note figure also involving a fourth, this time *ascending* by a leap ([bars 9–11]).

The following are points of interest in this fughetta:

- **Bars 1–5**: The exposition entries follow one another after three half notes, rather than two, giving the piece a sort of time-release acceleration effect when $\frac{2}{2}$ meter replaces the de facto $\frac{3}{2}$ meter later—as also happens in the first fugue of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and many others. More unusual in this exposition is to see the eighth-note countersubject, introduced at the soprano entry, coolly divided between the two upper voices at the bass entry, presumably for reasons of register ([bars 4–5]). This may be irregular, but it can hardly be said to weaken the composition in any way. Later, as has just been remarked, the stepwise eighth-note
figure appears less often than the figure with the leap, which nearly develops into a new countersubject.

- **Bars 5–8:** A suspiciously glib sequence emerging from the exposition accelerates and hits the ground running for an early cadence in the dominant. This makes a strong articulation, and a “rhyming” passage occurs at the end of the fugue, providing the kind of neat, decisive wrap-up that usually enlivens dances and other pieces in binary form. Bach wrote a number of other fugues with this sort of binary articulation—two figure in this volume: A-flat Major from book 1 of the *WTC* and B-flat Major from book 2—as well as fugal gigues in many of his keyboard suites. BWV 952 is a lopsided example.

- **Bars 13–15:** A pair of entries after the central cadence has led us to D minor, where the fugue suddenly changes style. It is hard to think of a move quite like this in any other Bach fugue, at least in any short one. For just a few bars it mimics a rhapsodic keyboard improvisation, beginning over a pedal, A (introduced very smoothly, very professionally). The motivic chatter of the subject dies down for the first time. The harmonic rhythm, hitherto very regular, relaxes for a moment, to good effect.

- **Bars 23–26:** This fughetta sets no store by consistent episodes; after another two entries and another cadence, the style changes again. Normal fugal writing gives way to trio texture, consisting of two matching upper voices over a swiftly moving bass, and a momentary dip into the *style galant*.

  Half-plaintive, half-amused, this episode draws on motifs from the subject only at the end of each sequence.
leg, answered—as a sort of putdown, perhaps—in inversion. The naive turn to the subdominant is another fresh touch \[\text{bar 26}\].

- Bars 26–34: A final array of subject entries (soprano, tenor, bass) culminates in the rhyming phrase that suggests binary structure. The tonic cadence in bar 34 balances the dominant cadence in bar 8. Bach modified the phrase subtly (as well as transposing it) so as to strengthen the feeling of finality, something he also helped by bringing back the de facto \(\frac{3}{2}\) meter of the fugue’s beginning in bar 26 and keeping that meter to the end.

A charming touch comes in bars 30–31. The very last entry rattles away in the low bass register for the first time, more like a reproof than an answer to the tenor entry just before. The original slow figure of bars 3–6, with its \textit{descending} stepwise eighth notes, inverts (not for the first time) to trace an \textit{ascending} fourth. Then it doubles itself in sixths for emphasis and slips directly into the original upbeat motif—that same ascending fourth in sixteenths (see example 3c). Presto, the countersubject was an inverted augmentation after all.