The Art of Fugue

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The Fugue on the chorale “Jesus Christus unser Heiland” counts as the rogue fugue in the present selection, perhaps, though one likes to think of every Bach fugue as rogue or phoenix or unicum in its own special way. It comes from the organ volume of the Clavierübung, Bach’s comprehensive publication of his keyboard works, which he issued serially and at leisure over the years 1726 to 1742. Volumes 1, 2, and 4 transmit well-known works like the Partitas, the Italian Concerto, and the “Goldberg” Variations.

In volume 3, less well known, a massive organ prelude and the grand “St. Anne” Fugue serve as bookends for a shelf of chorale preludes of many different kinds, based on chorales associated with the Lutheran catechism. Eight hymn melodies are each set twice, first as a large-scale piece for full organ with pedals, and then as a smaller setting for the manuals alone. Included in the collection is a little set of two-part inventions—Bach’s somewhat odd name for them is “Duetto”—which are often played on the harpsichord. The series of manualier chorales also can be
played on any keyboard instrument (harpsichord, clavichord, or piano), not only organ.

The heading “Fuga super ‘Jesus Christus unser Heiland’” would have categorized the piece for musicians of the time. The chorale fugue or fughetta is a special keyboard genre going back to the seventeenth century. A motif taken from the first line of a chorale, usually with some ornamentation, becomes the subject of a fugue, a fugue that ends with the entire first line presented in its simplest form in augmentation, as though rising above (or sinking below) the fray. Improvising fugues was part of the organist’s stock in trade, and in a chorale prelude we can picture him ruminating fugally on the main music of the hymn he is about to accompany, arriving at a weighty statement of it as a prompt to the congregation to start singing.

The present fugue is an almost unimaginably transfigured version of this genre, which Bach also resuscitated and handled less radically elsewhere in the Clavierübung. It must also be one of the most dramatic, in the sense of eventful, fugues Bach ever wrote. The drama begins in a mood of sobriety and pain and ends in transcendence. The “events” of this chorale fugue can serve as a focus for my discussion.

The subject comes from line 1 of a short catechism hymn sung for the Eucharist. Bach altered the fourth note of the melody from B♭ to B♮ (see example 15), though he set the same chorale in several other works (including the other chorale prelude on the same tune in the Clavierübung) without making this alteration; he had to make it here because he wanted to write a stretto fugue, and certain of the strettos require the alteration. The alteration itself required or rather allowed Bach to write interesting, often wrenching dissonances (see bars 7, 9, 11, 16, 25, 38, 44, 57, and 58). The organist and organ historian Norbert
Dufourcq, one of the few commentators who seem to have been struck by this work, speaks of its *chromaticisme tourmenté*.

**Section 1: Bars 1–19**

At the beginning of this stretto fugue, two four-part expositions of the subject in stretto actually overlap *[bars 1–11, 10–19]/*—a sober, oppressed, dense inception. Originally the stretto answer follows the subject after six beats, and indeed the whole of the exposition falls into a regular $\frac{3}{2}$ meter, the episode between the tenor/alto and soprano/bass pairs of entries lasting for six beats also.

The next exposition is rhythmically much less regular, indeed convoluted, willfully so, since in the first entry pair the answer follows after only one beat, and in the second pair after two beats. Since these extremely tight strettos do not “work” very naturally, we get a lot of tormented chromaticism.

Listen to Fugue on “Jesus Christus unser Heiland”: *Clavierübung*, book 3, here: http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/luminos.1.4
A countersubject, in its original form or in exact inversion, continues through each of the brief episodes in this section of the fugue, overlapping the entries [bars 5–7, 13–16]—a bit of unobtrusive virtuoso workmanship typical enough of this composer. But here, I believe, the music itself is intended to be as unobtrusive as the technique. The listener or even the player cannot be particularly conscious of this countersubject as such, with motion as characterless as this. All one really hears is a rhythmic layer—eighth notes against the heavy quarters of the subject (example 16a). This material has yet to reveal its true function, as a matrix for the evolution of something new and more important.

**EXAMPLE 16**

a.

![Example 16a graphic](image)

b.

![Example 16b graphic](image)

c.

![Example 16c graphic](image)
Typically in fugues—though not always, of course—a strong structural cadence, such as the cadence in the dominant C minor at bar 19, prepares a subject entry. This does not happen here. A new section, devoted primarily to the countersubject, begins with intimations of new energy conveyed by a short eighth-note upbeat figure, an upward leap of a fourth taken from the subject (G ↗ C, C ↗ F, F ↗ B♭). The section continues for sixteen bars—almost as long as the fugue’s first section.

The “event” here is the transformation of that innocuous countersubject into something newly distinctive and expressive. In effect, we get a new countersubject, and for congregations that had known their hymns since childhood it immediately recalled the last line of “Jesus Christus unser Heiland” (see examples 15 and 16b); the last line of this hymn is doubly memorable as by far the highest and freest of the four. The ordinary chorale fugue treats line 1 of its chorale; Bach’s Fugue on “Jesus Christus unser Heiland” treats line 1, then line 4, then brings lines 1 and 4 together in its unique conclusion. Once again Bach presents the material in both recto and inverted forms, in the high voices [bars 23–27], while the low voices issue a knot of subject entries in close stretto. To hear these as the primary element rather than as a backdrop would hardly be possible, however; the low entries are obscured, as none others are in this fugue. (The bass entry starts not at its ordinary pace but with a momentary diminution—the new eighth-note upbeat C ↗ F—and the tenor entry blurs as a result of a false stretto in the alto, G ↗ C [bars 23–24].)

As for the transformation process, example 16b does not attempt to trace but can perhaps suggest the subtlety involved. The first element of change is rhythmic: the abbreviation of the original
four-note pattern, as in bars 3 and 5, to a more shapely and distinctive pattern of three, as in bars 21 and 23. The second element is melodic: the repeated emphasis on the affective semitone $D\flat$ $C$ in the three-note figure $C\ D\flat\ C$, which then shrinks into just the two notes $D\flat\ C$: a truly Bachian stroke of high pathos.

The fugue almost grinds to a halt, as though overcome, on a low pedal $C$ lasting for two and a half bars [bars 27–29]. A pedal on $C$ in the key of $F$ minor ought to presage the end of the piece, or at least the end of a major passage, but the music surges up, agitated by sixteenth notes, till it reaches an extraordinary moment of collapse and release as the pedal evaporates and the countersubject attains its highest point yet, $F\ G\flat\ F$ in the soprano. The place is both a climax of pathos—the highest $G\flat$ in the composition so far—and a consolation, because of a new stage of melodic transformation that leads to a placid new cadence. A beautiful long, relaxed episode, at first in only three parts, mulls over the major-mode sonorities that have been denied to this fugue until now. The countersubject remains in the spotlight. Contrasting episodes are routine in Bach’s fugues; what makes this one such an event is its dramatic, even melodramatic highlighting.

The countersubject has been transformed—has come into its own, rather—and now it disappears, or rather, it makes a strategic exit. At the cadence, listen to the soaring upward-fourth leaps in the tenor and the bass [bar 34], the bass $G\flat$ also echoing the earlier climax on the high $G\flat$ [34, 30].

Section 3: Bars 36–56

By the time of its second large structural cadence, the fugue has ranged far from its sober, depressed, dense inception. The subject has been lost. Even the tormented minor mode and its
chromaticism have been forgotten, until the cadence twists us back to B♭ minor, the subdominant. Now the piece shakes itself and returns to its origins, in a new intense round of entries in stretto, entries of a very different character.

Having already challenged the subject, as it were, with two (related) countersubjects, Bach now does something different. He unleashes a whole arsenal of technical devices to destabilize the subject—and disorient the listener. The soprano hiccups and leaps up to an entry placed at the very top of the keyboard, leaving a gap in the middle of the texture [bar 37]. Following the previous alto entry after five beats (an odd, not the usual even number), this raises a specter of false accentuation to taunt the listener who remembers her catechism: Je-sus Chri-stus un-ser Hei-ei-land. The alto and tenor engage in frantic chromatic gesturing. Sixteenth-note figures enter and the bass begins to dance in a de facto ¾ meter, for six bars (equivalent to four and a half bars in 4: see example 16c). A clear motif emerges, F E♭ D | E♭ A♭ ↗ D, joined in canon by the soprano: E♭ D C | D ↗ G ↘ C. (This motif, the most important new thematic element in the fugue, had already been teased out of the end of the subject in bars 39–41, by the alto. There is a beautiful forecast of it in bars 25–26.) Although Bach will now sometimes fit this motif loosely in with the subject [bars 39–40, 43–44, 51], he will conspicuously not develop it into a new consistent countersubject.

For a considerable time the counterpoint remains loose and fantastic. Two rather isolated subject entries in the bass [bars 44–46, 50–52] are spaced out by episodes [41–43, 46–50, 53–56], and a larger rhythmic module begins to assert itself, for the entries and episodes all occupy about the same time span. In the first two of the episodes just mentioned the new motif
proliferates, and in the third it generates a swift new figure, C referees E F | B referees E referees. This forms a canonic sequence driving toward a cadence.

Bars 57–67

Again the subject is losing ground; its stretto energy seems all played out. But there is still one exceptional contrapuntal tour de force to come. The next, next-to-final event in this fugue answers to the generic dictate of the chorale fugue: the return of the tonic key and the apparition of the fugue subject augmented to half notes.

As if augmentation were not an event momentous enough to terminate so intense a composition—or as if in the history of the genre chorale fugue the very device had worn thin—when Bach brings the subject in augmentation in the soprano he brings it simultaneously in the tenor in its normal note values. By this time he has contrived strettos at nearly every possible time interval—after one, two, four, five, and six beats. Think of this combination of subject and augmentation as yet another stretto of a sort, a stretto at time-interval zero, after no beats at all.

Not only this: the subject-augmentation combination is further overlaid by the countersubject, returning after an absence of twenty bars, reminding us at the end of the fugue of the end of the chorale, and creating a sublime clockwork of continuous eighth notes geared to the characteristic quarter-note motion, geared in turn to the half-note master meter of the new augmentation. Instead of increasing the density of the original rhythmic layering of quarter notes and eighths, the terminal extra layer seems to clear it up and makes it lucid. The
countersubject reasserts itself in one form or another (sometimes, of course, in inversion) in almost every bar of the augmented entry. Bar by bar—this is the same frequency as in the beautiful central episode.

The whole is whitened. Sixteenth notes are leached out of the texture. The music repeats itself like a mantra. And the evaporation process at the very end—the cadence glimmering away as in a dust cloud—has to count as the last striking event in this strikingly eventful fugue. We are not usually asked to track so many changes of mood in a fugue; the process here is fascinating, dizzying. After all of the changing the music ends with transcendence. I glimpse in our fugue a not-arbitrary series of what Robert Schumann called Seelenzuständen—“soul conditions”:

The soul in torment . . . *andante e mesto*

Anguished transformations . . . *sempre più mesto*

A vision of grace . . . *tranquillo subito*

Rejection: fantasies, frenzies . . . *un poco agitato, quasi scherzando (ma in tempo)*

Resolution: sublimation and release . . . *calmo e semplice*

A final note: it is interesting that “Jesus Christus unser Heiland,” the most distressed of all the sixteen chorale settings in *Clavierübung*, book 3, seems so far in sentiment from the hymn it ostensibly glosses. The words of this Communion hymn are didactic, not affective. Only one of its seven stanzas has been offered, without too much conviction, as an incentive toward Dufourcq’s “tormented chromaticism”: stanza 2, paraphrasing Jesus’ words in the Gospel of St. Matthew about the bread and wine—“take, eat, this is my body” and “this is my blood of the New Testament.”
But when Bach wrote his Passion According to St. Matthew, it was typically the torment of the soul that incited distress, in arias such as “Buß und Reu” and “Erbarme dich,” not the Eucharist. He greeted the Last Supper with confidence and a special, simple beauty, in the bass arioso “Nehmet, esset; das ist mein Leib.”