This fugue stands out among Bach’s more celebrated *affettuoso* fugues in F-sharp minor and related keys, such as the imposing Fugue in B Minor later in *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and both Kyries from the Mass in B Minor, for its immediacy as well as its brevity. The countersubject with its ceaselessly sobbing figure has reminded many—indeed, most—commentators of the chorus “O Mensch bewein’ dein’ Sünde groß” from the St. Matthew Passion, and the chromatically tinged subject too practically cries out for words, words in the affective poetic language of Bach’s cantata librettists Salomo Franck, Marianne von Ziegler, or Picander. The inching upward and falling back of the melodic line could paint the Christian soul in the toils of sin, or Christ Himself bearing the cross.

Was there ever a moment when this subject matter couldn’t make up its mind whether it wanted to be a fugue or a da capo aria in some anguished cantata? For this “beautiful and haunting work,” as Laurence Dreyfus calls it, also troubles him, as it has others, on account of anomalous or at least unusual features. The
pathos comes very largely—though not exclusively, as I hope I can show—from the powerful affect of the basic material; the sobbing of the countersubject persists even when the subject is inverted. Apart from this inversion, the fugue makes use of no fugal device or artifice. A beautiful stretto that starts in bar 22 fades almost immediately (and a possible exact inversion of the countersubject is never actuated).

The music does not modulate, except to the obligatory dominant key, C-sharp minor—an unusual if not an isolated circumstance for this composer. The mediant, A major, which one would also think obligatory, is just barely acknowledged [bar 15]; major-mode sonorities are in very short supply. This makes for a profound austerity, to which a few short episodes, using mostly the same material, offer a little mitigation, even though that material derives, as usual, from the subject. It is as though having invented the most emotion-drenched subject/countersubject unit he could, Bach wanted to see if he could sustain a fugue with nothing else.

Not quite nothing else: if he draws very little on contrapuntal resources, he manipulates texture as a way of shaping the musical discourse. A distinct textural change divides the composition in three. Trio texture, with a “walking” bass a good distance below only two upper top voices, distinguishes a middle section or middle phase of the piece occupying a higher range than the others [bars 20–27]. It is demarcated on both sides by similar cadences in the dominant key, C-sharp minor.

First Phase: Bars 1–20

The opening exposition takes up almost half of this fugue; we should track it closely.
Bars 1–7: The basic material seems especially painful because it moves haltingly; the unexpected pause on note 3 makes the following three-note figure falter or stumble. (The long note 3 receives royal treatment later.) Then the subject simply stops, leaving the space between subject and answer unmediated: a strangely sedative gesture, again very unusual in terms of fugal practice.

The countersubject, beginning with what amounts to a broken inversion of the subject—a forecast of the strict inversion that will materialize, and a hint of the stretto that will not—proceeds with a scale extending the subject’s most decided move, eighth notes curling up through a fourth to the peak note C♯; the scale goes up to D♯. Another fourth, not a scale but a slower leap near the cadence, works to balance the continual stepwise motion.

The first episode, fleeting as it may be, ventures up into a pitch region that has previously been denied to this constrained subject. It reaches the pitch B—a small message of consolation or hope, perhaps. If so it is dashed by the sobbing motif that takes over and drifts down, and down, into the third entry.

Bars 8–11: The third entry develops a second countersubject, at first subsidiary, yet strong enough to surge over the other voices [bar 10]; it surges even more richly the next time [18]. The second episode starts with the same upward-curling figure as the first, but now without the sense of upward liberation. We do not even reach B this time, and C♯ is still some way in the future. We have to wait a considerable time for the next entry.
Bars 12–18: This appears on the tonic, rather than on the dominant as anticipated, and as Roger Bullivant observes, given the long delay it sounds less like the completion of a four-part exposition than a new departure—a new exposition, with an extra voice added to the three we already know about. (We were not necessarily expecting a fourth voice, after all. The Prelude is for three.) Perhaps Bach chose the tonic to avoid invading the space above high C♯, where the more usual dominant entry would have taken him, and to allow the subject to stand out, in the soprano, yet also stay low, so as to set off the central trio section, which lies conspicuously higher. Besides the delay and the texture, this entry owes its climactic effect to the range—low as it is, it touches the highest pitches heard so far—and to rich doublings of fragments from both countersubjects, at the tenth and the sixth. The end of the second countersubject guides in the low cadence [bar 18].

Second Phase: Bars 20–28

There is a sense of release as the soprano moves even higher and the texture thins and widens, leading to a more decisive cadence in bar 20. The subject appears again, in inversion—an inversion the composer appears to have obscured deliberately, by means of a faster, more articulate line above it. At all events it is easy to miss.

In the soprano entry (recto) that comes next, the walking bass of the trio texture unwinds to provide an interesting, almost bright new perspective on the fugal material [bars 26–28]. Bach obscures the opening of this recto statement too, this time melodically rather than contrapuntally.
Phase 1 of the fugue moved to an expressive climax in its last, four-part entry. Broadly recapitulatory in quality, phase 3 resumes this process, building up to a level of pathos—we can indeed speak of passion—well in excess of the promise even of this fugue’s highly charged subject matter.

On the matter of sectionalization: admittedly, the break between what I am calling phases 2 and 3 of the Fugue in F-sharp Minor is fuzzier than that between 1 and 2. Busoni, for one, heard the work as a two-part structure and railed against the idea of a three-part division. My phase 3, with its first subject entry still in three voices, and with the soprano still in the same high range as in the trio—even higher, one could say—can seem like a continuation of phase 2. However, that subject entry (in the tenor) returns to the tonic, after clear cadential articulation [bar 28]. Phase 1 of the fugue has three of its four entries starting on the tonic, both entries of phase 2 start on the dominant, and phase 3 has all three of its entries on the tonic.

Leaps of a fourth emerge around the tenor entry of bars 29–32 and multiply around the bass entry that follows directly—another inverted entry, now in four parts, and still in the tonic [bars 32–35]. This inversion no one will miss; an outer voice, the bass, tenders the subject unequivocally. (Was the earlier inverted entry muted so that this one would speak more eloquently? Whereas in the recto subject a single harmony underpins notes 1–3, in the inversion that critical note 3 acquires an affective new harmony.) It is a moment of high pathos, with the bass tracking the beginning of the soprano’s winding descent to the final cadence.

An inverted “answer” on the tonic—that certainly breaks textbook rules for a fugal answer. Yet this indeed feels like an
answer in a nontechnical sense, a subdued but entirely alert response to the recto, a response that deepens dialogue. Hugo Riemann spoke of “a greater inwardness, a deeper sinking into self.”

Bach has raised the emotional stakes here and still holds a king and an ace at the ready. More fourth leaps lead into a particularly plangent circle-of-fifths sequence, gleaming with major-mode sonorities [bars 35–36]. The sobbing of the softly touching lines is relieved by the doubling in tenths and sixths; this resource was employed before, as we have seen, but never so expressively. There is a special poignancy to major-mode chords—B, E, A, and D major, never presented quite explicitly—in a work that has rationed them until now. As this final episode ends—after only two and a half bars, though its shadow haunts bars 37–40—it’s offer of alleviation is trumped by an extraordinary augmented chord C♯ E♯ A♯ in the final subject entry. This chord reharmonizes note 3 once again, now over a dominant pedal [bar 37]. Dissonant, wrenching moments are not all that rare near the ends of Bach pieces, but this one bites harder than most.

By bringing the subject at the same pitch level, the final entry recapitulates the exposition’s fourth entry. More broadly, the three tonic entries in bars 28–40 recapitulate the entire tonic-weighted exposition, bars 1–20. The final tierce de Picardie is one of Bach’s most beautiful.

So I do not agree with Laurence Dreyfus that this fugue “seems to suggest a relatively static rather than dynamic reading,” and that for Bach

it was the number and quality of inventions that he could coax from
his materials rather than their exhibited sequence that counted. For this reason, it is more compelling to hear the piece as a logical succession of paradigmatic changes rather than syntagmatic causalities: chains of metaphors rather than metonymies, as it were.

Indeed I find it hard to distinguish my clear sense of the sequence exhibited in this piece from its emotional immediacy. Baroque composers depict the passions, Romantic composers express them—this was a fairly common formulation before the concept of expression had taken a beating from recent aesthetic philosophers. Expression is more likely to be located now in the listener’s ear rather than in the composer’s pen, let alone his heart. So be it—for this listener there is an unmediated quality to this music, an intimation of the personal and the private that is unusual in Baroque music. The material itself has much to do with this quality but so also does the way the material is deployed in time.

In both Kyries of the B-Minor Mass, communal passion, communal pathos is distanced—as is of course entirely appropriate—and in the B-Minor Fugue from The Well-Tempered Clavier, book 1, what seems like personal pathos is theatricalized. These are grand, elaborate compositions, far overshadowing the terse, almost minimal Fugue in F-sharp Minor. That very terseness empowers special expressive immediacy.