Where to start is with two pages at the center of the Fugue in A Minor—the essential pages, containing a second, free fugue within the three-part sectional form (A B A'). In section 3 of the work, A', new themes developed in section 2 will combine with the subject of section 1.

This central fugue circulates a familiar-sounding chromatic subject twice through each of the four voices. This seems a better way of describing the overall plan than to speak of two (irregular) four-part expositions, for the entries all come in pairs—with substantial and specially important episodes between them; the motif of the first of these episodes is worked into a freely varied countersubject. And the time interval between entries expands from

Listen to Fantasy in A Minor, BWV 904, here: http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/luminos.1.5
Listen to Fugue in A Minor, BWV 904, here: http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/luminos.1.6
two beats in the first pair of entries, which therefore counts as a close stretto between bass and alto [bars 37–39], to four beats—one bar—in the second pair [41–44], a bar and a half in the third [48–51], and two bars in the fourth and last [55–59].

Clearly this music’s almost surplus expressivity has not been achieved at the expense of systematic thinking. Bach does not employ system for system’s sake, however, at least not here. The result of the time interval’s expanding (or, looked at another way, the stretto’s unwinding) is that we get a bigger allotment of descending semitones each time. They soon become hypnotic.

The episodes are specially important because of the essentially neutral affect of the main, chromatic theme itself (which I am happier calling “theme,” rather than “subject”; it lacks the cogency of a typical Bach subject, even though it can serve as such in a subsidiary capacity). Anyone’s instinctive response to this pattern of slow descending semitones will probably be to lament along with them, as we do with Dido’s Lament in Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas, the Crucifixus in Bach’s Mass in B Minor, and any number of other unforgettable moments in opera, church music, and the repertory of organ chorales.

But in fact this chromatic pattern also turns up again and again in Baroque music not associated with any text, so much so that it counts as one of the era’s insistent clichés. The Bach scholar Peter Williams, who has written a whole book on the history of The Chromatic Fourth, from Cipriano de Rore and William Byrd to Bartók and Stravinsky, cites its appearance in about fifty instrumental works by Bach. (And he must
have chosen his examples from among many more, since the Fantasy and Fugue in A Minor is not among them.) Whether composers meant to evoke the affect of lament in the many instrumental fugues that use the chromatic fourth as a subject, countersubject, or subsidiary subject, is a real question. Williams thinks not.

Some of these fugues are certainly quite dry. However, the accents of lament must always be at least latent in the chromatic subjects, always open to the possibility of activation by means of some further musical parameter or device. Here this function is filled by the one-bar motif introduced in the first episode [bar 39]. Its anapest rhythm and its syncopation survive through an almost unthinkable diversity of variations, the variants becoming more and more expressive and even more hypnotic than the descending semitones.

This music lives on its wealth of exquisite detail, for which no level of sensitivity can be too hyper. At the keyboard one follows it fascinated—in my case, I have to say, with a keyed-up mixture of feelings like delight, admiration, and apprehension. Things are harder at the word processor, frequent raids on the thesaurus key alt–fi notwithstanding. With music of this kind we really have to go bar by bar, beat by fascinating beat.

*Fugue 2: Bars 36–60*

The new fugue begins directly after the final entry of the original subject [bars 33–36], the subject of fugue 1 (fugue 1 is discussed below).
Bars 36–38: The rhythmic transition here is very striking. When the sixteenth-note motion tapers off into quarters (articulated as a heavy staccato) there is a feeling of uncertainty that deepens with the slack appoggiatura D–C (not D–C♯) in the alto. The cadence seems unsure of its own finality, as though sensing...
something untoward ahead in the stretto’s tread of unvarying quarter notes. There are as many as nine of these quarters in all.

- **Bars 39–41:** The pace has to pick up again, and when it does the rhythm of the all-important new motif too is uncertain, or at least halting (see example 18a). As the motif begins to probe chromatic space, we can also hear it as vulnerable and wary. The peak note of its anapest figure is nearly always hit by a dissonance caused by the surrounding counterpoint (at its first appearance, D♯ in the alto makes a dissonance with C in the bass). Often, as here, the dissonance or its impression lingers on, delaying its resolution until the last moment.

- **Bars 41–43:** Manipulating the motif into a countersubject to the chromatic theme becomes a very delicate procedure. Bach first tests the waters with just the motif’s ending figure. He adds the rest of it almost covertly, on a weak beat (example 18b), though the material gains confidence (and credibility as a countersubject) inasmuch as the motif now appears as a sequence drawn out as a melodic line in a single voice, rather than shared between imitating voices.

- **Bar 43:** A new arpeggio figure eases the motif over onto the strong beat; as happens almost routinely in this music, one idea flows into another seamlessly and with the greatest eloquence (example 18c).

- **Bars 44–47:** Fugue 2 is laid out symmetrically or systematically, at least for a while, with episodes of the same sort after the first and second pairs of entries (though the latter is in three parts and is extended) [bars 41–43,}
If the motif seemed (to me) fearful before, now its worst fears have been realized and it settles into varieties of plaint or lament. This affective posture matches the aptitude of the chromatic theme only too well.

Again the motif gains coherence when its sequences run together in a single voice, and urgency as well, for the voice is the soprano and this has moved up rather suddenly to high C. The descent is slow.

- **Bar 47**: Bach also plays with the eighth-note figure from the episodes, drawing a burst of emotion from it in a truly vertiginous transformation (example 18d). One can hear this cry in the tenor as an anticipation of a whole series of such transformations coming up in the soprano.

- **Bars 48–50**: Few bars in the whole of this work depart from the minor mode—only two bars in fugue 1 and two in fugue 2. The present entries in C and G major cloud major modality with minor-mode nuance and ambivalent dissonances.

  Above these entries the variants of the motif sound to me more than plaintive, they sound excruciating; the sixteenth-note anapest figure originally heard as $\text{step} \rightarrow \text{step}$ (A–B–C), treated to some kind of out-of-control inversion process, shatters into more extreme figures: first $\text{diminished 5th} \rightarrow \text{step}$, then its distorting-mirror image $\text{diminished 5th} \rightarrow \text{step}$, $\text{minor 6th} \rightarrow \text{step}$, and finally a piercing $\text{minor 7th} \rightarrow \text{step}$ (example 18e).

- **Bars 51–53**: This very fraught passage needs relief and gets it, from a fresh episode using the basic material in mild ways (example 18f). There are still descending semitones in the upper voices but never two in a row,
and the version of the motif low down in the bass feels open and kinetic. After a few leaps and bounds this version converts back into the original motif, at its original register—another seamless, eloquent transition (example 18g).

- **Bars 53–54:** Once back to its natural habitat in the alto-soprano range, the motif is ready to mutate again. A simple, soft variant slips down—by this time we are listening to every heartbeat—into a beautifully molded half cadence (example 18h) and then slips up again, in a sort of pensive rebound (example 18i). The soprano waits for the alto to join it on the note B (example 18j). The alto itself waits for another lingering resolution. The music is waiting for the final pair of entries, a tenor-soprano pair that will form the climax to this section of the fugue.

- **Bars 54–59:** This climax employs another expressive variant of the motif, which in the first entry of the pair comes at the interval of an augmented fourth above the chromatic theme, on the weak beat (example 18k), and in the second entry a major sixth below it, on the strong beat (example 18l).

  Ever-new wrenching dissonances are the outcome of this technical tour de force. Each of the two entries gets special enhancement: the first of them is supported by the lowest pitches so far, led into by a marvelous leap in the left hand down from high to low E. The whole bass line pulses with new resonance. The second entry draws on the full four-part texture for the first time . . . and brings a (more or less) new rhythmic figure in the tenor, expressive to the last . . .
Bars 59–60: Can we really keep up with all this, and thrill to it? Although the themes remain at work after what is really the final cadence, in bar 56, they are now more transparent than expressive. A “cleared-up” variant of the motif over a de facto dominant pedal makes a perfectly paced transition back to fugue 1 (example 18m—a quite remote variant, though bar 53 offers a precedent). Bach writes a simple little stretto here, as a farewell to a motif in the process of (temporary) liquidation.

The dissonances are still there, defanged. The chromatic fourth withdraws to the emotional neutrality that Peter Williams says is its normal condition in instrumental writing of the Baroque.

Fugue 1: Bars 1–36

Sir Hubert Parry called the Fugue in A Minor “one of Bach's very finest fugues”—and has been criticized for it. (Parry wrote one of three major studies of the composer that came out almost at the same time, in 1905–9, the first of any consequence since Philipp Spitta’s foundational study of thirty years earlier. The others were by Albert Schweitzer and the French musicologist André Pirro.) Of course I agree with Parry.

But even Parry would not have called this music consistently very fine. The awkwardness of the first subject comes into focus if it is compared to a sample from The Well-Tempered Clavier similar to it in contour (see example 19): too many heavy beats, too many As and Ds, and the diminution in bar 7 is too obvious. The comparison makes one wonder, incidentally, how later authorities can rest easy with a date as late as 1725 for this music. They have built a good case that the Fugue in A Minor and the Fantasy—a
superb extended essay in concerto form—were not written together as a pair and probably not brought together by the composer; whether the fugue’s three sections in their present form were written together as late as 1725 has not been investigated.

Other weaknesses show up in section 1—as well as more fine things for Parry to admire, starting with the link between the opening entry and the answer. After the subject’s prolix ending, any composer would probably want to move upward with some vigor, but to run (or race) its characteristic interval of a minor sixth up to the top of the keyboard and hang there—that could not have been predicted. This haunting sound never recurs.

The lack of a real countersubject allows for new harmonies at later entries, as well as varied counterpoints; bars 25–28 are particularly rich. An episode working through some major keys makes an energetic foil to the main material \([\text{bars} \, 29–32]\). It combines the end of the subject with parts of the link and returns expertly modified so as to fit the deepening sobriety—gloom, we may as well call it—that settles in on the fugue’s last page \([\text{bars} \, 71–74]\).

This music is monolithic; fugue 1 might be picked out to exemplify the world of the Baroque, the world Bach knew in his
early years, while fugue 2 looks forward to the music of sensibility, the *empfindsamer Stil* of a younger generation. Here the music is constantly evolving. Its emotion is nursed within; if fugue 2 laments, it does so alone in a private space, not communally at any kind of public ritual. Fugue 1 is severe, rhetorical, admonitory. The voice may be hoarse, but the lesson is momentous. One fugue suffers, the other sermonizes.

**The Fugue Subjects Combined: Bars 61–80**

In no other fugue of this type does Bach draw so extreme a contrast between sections (allowing for one equivocal exception: the unfinished Contrapunctus 14 in *The Art of Fugue*). How does he accommodate the contrasted worlds of section 1 and section 2 in section 3? Through melody and harmony, rather than counterpoint.

The combination of the three themes in triple counterpoint works less well than one might have expected—less well, at least, than I would have expected—for while the chromatic theme does its job dependably in the wake of the main subject, the expressive motif comes rather too late, and its initial launch in the high register does not bear comparison with similar launches earlier ([bars 63, 43 and 53]). We also miss the tenor. But the motif reaches a kind of apogee over the last stretto of the chromatic theme, wedged in between entries of the main subject ([bars 67–68]). The two upper voices go high, entwine, fuse, and implode into a de facto run of continuous sixteenth notes. The motif seems to yearn as it disappears in a new liquidation.

And the big moment in section 3 comes at the encounter of all the themes in the last of its three combined subject entries ([bars 74–78]). (The second of the combined entries, in shock from
the liquidation of the motif, leaves the motif out and uses only the other two themes.) Clearly this is the rhetorical climax of the whole composition. The original subject has been reharmonized before, as we have seen, but never as drastically as here—the forthright subdominant on the third beat of bar 74, the flicker of modal harmony in the C-major chord on the fourth beat, and its realization in the magnificent low C three bars later. Bach’s homily comes through with unshakable authority.

Only after these moments have passed does the crucial motif come into play, with a gesture that reclaims the subtlety of its operations in fugue 2. It bonds quietly—so quietly that one hardly notices—with shreds of the main fugue subject on the way to the final cadence [bars 78–80]. A melodic invention of the simplest kind brings this fugue’s two opposite emotional worlds into a final equilibrium.