The Art of Fugue

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A prelude of quite special warmth, and full of youthful fire! and a double fugue which forms one of the noblest numbers in the work, and one which has, above all, a soft elegiacal character showing itself more and more in the second half, and giving to it the appearance of an epilogue (somewhat after the manner of Schumann’s “The Poet Speaks”); so that one almost regrets that it is not the last number of the second book.

In truth this fugue is the real epilogue of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*!

There is a good deal to interrogate, as today’s critics like to say, in this assertion. Hugo Riemann was so committed to the idea of the organic work of art that he elected to post a dream of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* as a “work,” a coherent cycle—like Schumann’s *Kinderszenen*, like *Dichterliebe*, like (perhaps) the Chopin Preludes—with a carefully calculated termination, though of course he knew perfectly well it was not. What he did know was that the deft, low-key Fugue in B Minor, next in order and the last in *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, refused to round it out with any kind of definitive gesture of closure.
The notion of a misplaced epilogue to the *WTC* seems wrong-headed to musicians and listeners today, not many of whom will want to associate the mood of the Fugue in B Major with “Der Dichter spricht,” the meditative, nostalgic, half-improvisatory final number of *Kinderszenen*, either. The nobility of fugues may also present a problem. Yet Riemann’s characterization of the second half of the fugue as “softly elegiacal” would probably gain more assent. I hope so, having characterized the passage as “valedictory” myself.

The correlation of aesthetic effects with data analyzed from the scores themselves was, I believe, the bottom line in Riemann’s method, as it is in mine, though given his other concerns he might not have wanted to put it that way. This was the payoff line for Riemann because it was here that he engaged with the work of art as art, as a variety of human experience rather than a text to analyze.

The analytical plays in to the aesthetic. One premise for a musical criticism that distances itself from the impressionistic is that specific passages, progressions, notes, and harmonies in the score provoke our experience of music. The important clarifying phrase here is “rather than the musical flow in general,” for a lot of writing about Bach fugues enthuses about the manipulation of the subjects and answers, analyzes the episodes, and then seems to take it for granted that the piece will run along on its own, or at any rate without further commentary. No account is taken of the varied, subtle, essential ways in which the matter is deployed in time.

When Donald Tovey made his well-known distinction between Baroque music as “architectural” and music in the Classical style as “dramatic,” he was acknowledging ambiguity in the concept of musical form; most music has form of some kind, in the sense of a significant ordering of events in time, but
form means something very different for Haydn than it does for Bach. The music moves through time in different ways, epitomized for Tovey by differences in the process of tonal modulation. Unfortunately his formulation carries the implication that Baroque music is static, or at least relatively static, and that vertical relationships are the ones that really matter in contrapuntal music, not horizontal, temporal ones. Tovey sometimes came close to saying just this—as when on one occasion he advised listeners to expect no more from Bach than “a noble flow of fugue texture.” I don’t recall such advice in connection with Bach keyboard fugues, of which he seldom published analyses, and when he did, as in his Companion to “The Art of Fugue,” he didn’t always act on that implication. In any case, while this book follows Tovey’s lead in some obvious ways, there is a deep level on which it runs counter to Tovey. I also part company with Laurence Dreyfus when he reads Bach’s fugues as “relatively static rather than dynamic.”

Another premise for criticism is that music’s character is somehow accessible to words. No one believes that the technical information put forth by critics and analysts can explain music’s affective quality, only that it can offer support for assertions—verbal constructions—that they make about quality. And almost everything about the project has always been fragile. Skeptics will not believe that aesthetic effects are more than subjective “impressions.” While “data” can presumably be verified objectively, one self-appointed authority selects particular data from the mass available in any situation and unilaterally affirms its salience. And it hardly needs saying (though perhaps it does, once in a while) that response to music depends on more than just the score: on performance, tradition, audience psychology, ideology, and so on.
Small wonder this kind of criticism isn’t widely practiced. Over the years, its practitioners do so with clearer eyes and lower expectations. That there is something more than personal whim in judgments about art we infer from small facts such as this: a critic writing around 1900 could find a passage in a WTC fugue “elegiacal” and point to that as a primary feature of the work (“above all”), while another critic writing around 2000 experiences it as valedictory—and just as primary. The two adjectives brush against a common nexus of feeling. I am sure that Bach’s own contemporaries sensed something of the same kind in this music, and that if they had written about it, which they did not, since they did not consider it primary, they would have found other adjectives for it, adjectives of their own and of their own time.

Riemann adduced data analyzed from the text of the WTC to support what he said about the character of the fugue, and I have done the same. He knew, I know, and everyone knows that prose cannot track the immediacy of aesthetic experience. But prose can cozy up to it, suggest it, create an aura about it that heightens sensitivity. Such writing depends on simile (“like a deep bow”), metaphor (“a gust of air”), the pathetic fallacy (a figure “emerges from the shadows”), logorrhea (music that is “acquiescent, sheltered, pacific”). We accept that words will often fall flat, if sometimes they can provide light, insight.

The reader who glances back at the essay on the Fugue in B Major with these questions in mind will find all the samples of verbiage just cited, as well as sentences containing no special words at all, only technical description. It may seem like dry analysis. Yet these submissions too, or most of them, are meant to function directly as criticism—even as they continually
expose another of criticism’s notorious fragilities. A critic may intuit but fail to find figurative language to register issues of aesthetic import. (The situation can be dire when the issues are important enough.) “Two bars later G♯ is touched again”; this matters, but why—to what aesthetic end? Often one cannot say, but best put it in, alert the musician-reader, and maybe energize his or her own response.

I spoke of two premises above. A third and deepest premise is that music’s grip on our inner life is tied up with our other feelings, not predicated, as used to be argued, on some special “aesthetic emotion.” This premise is not too fragile. It will seem self-evident to many. Talk mediates, differentiates, elucidates, and consoles; we use words, however imprecisely, to talk about love and death because talk, it seems, we must. We also use and surely must use words to talk about music.