

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 16 July 2022 7.30pm

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

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Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

Art of Fugue BWV1080 (by 1742, rev. 1745-9)

according to the first printed edition of May 1751, ed. CPE Bach

Contrapunctus I • Contrapunctus II • Contrapunctus III • Contrapunctus IV •

Canon per Augmentationem in Contrario Motu Canon alla Ottava •

Contrapunctus V • Contrapunctus VI à 4 in Stylo Francese • Contrapunctus VII à 4 per Augmentationem et Diminutionem •

Canon alla Decima in Contrapunto alla Terza •

Contrapunctus VIII à 3 • Contrapunctus IX à 4 alla Duodecima • Contrapunctus X alla Decima • Contrapunctus XI à 4 •

Contrapunctus XII inversus (a) Forma recta, (b) Forma inversa • Contrapunctus XIII inversus (a) Forma recta, (b) Forma inversa •

Canon alla Duodecima in Contrapunto alla Quinta •

Fuga à 3 (4?) Soggetti (incomplete)

At the end of this evening, John Gilhooly will be awarding Mahan with the Wigmore Medal

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In his mid-50s, **Bach** began to turn his attention away from his usual duties as a musician-for-hire toward various independent projects centred on his legacy as a musical thinker. Having compiled the necessary cantata cycles for his directorship of the main Leipzig churches, he seems to have composed very little for the church in this period and instead took a renewed interest specifically in music theory, copying out of a number of important treatises on counterpoint and harmony as well as older repertoire by Frescobaldi and Palestrina. Nor was he indifferent to modern trends, as in the same period he not only acquired and performed works by Pergolesi and Caldara but also responded quite enthusiastically to the *galant* style of his sons, most notably in the second book of the *Well-tempered Clavier* (c.1740). In the 14 fugues (NB A=1, B=2, etc., B+A+C+H = 14) and four canons that make up the work, Bach was essentially throwing a lifeline to a form that by the mid-18th Century had become, to most musicians, obsolete. In the hands of even the geniuses of the High Baroque, fugue was an essentially dramatic form whereby a sense of gravitas and seriousness was given to disparate melodic elements ultimately culminating in large masses of harmony; hence the colourful tension between weightiness and ornament that defines the choral fugues of the Handelian oratorio. To Bach, however, the various techniques of fugue-writing, particularly esoteric ones such as invertible counterpoint, were themselves the basis of musical 'meaning'. Thus, fugal expression was understood by Bach as deriving from the immanent meaning of the relations between notes as opposed to extra-musical considerations such as text or a limited motivic vocabulary with vague rhetorical connotations.

At least in the form transmitted by the posthumous engraving of 1751 supervised by CPE Bach, the architecture of the *Art of Fugue* is more or less straightforward. As with many didactic tomes of the period, the movements are graded; thus, each successive section is more complex in some way than the previous. The first four fugues are 'simple' fugues in that they are based on a single theme, inverted in fugues 3 and 4. The next three fugues are in 'stretto', with the theme used in counterpoint with itself and thus imitated in close succession between the separate voices. In fugue 5, for instance, the theme is used in both regular and inverted form, which are then superimposed in the final bars. In fugue 6, four forms of the theme are used: regular, inverted, regular 'in diminution' (note values halved), and inverted in diminution. Fugue 7 uses *six* different forms of the theme: regular, inverted, regular and inverted both in diminution, then both forms 'in augmentation' (note values doubled). In the next two fugues, Bach introduces new themes. Fugue 9 is constructed with counterpoint at the 12th, with the original theme also appearing a fifth lower and the

new theme occasionally sounding a fifth higher. The counterpoint of fugue 10 is at the 10th, with each of the two themes being doubled in thirds and sixths. The next two movements are triple fugues (for reasons that are unclear, one of them is the 8th fugue in the 1751 engraving). In each of these triple fugues, the original theme is rhythmically modified and decorated; the second theme is based on the pair of descending semitones known as the BACH motif (in German notation: B-flat – A – C – B-natural), which plays a prominent role in the last fugue. Fugues 12 and 13 are paired with their exact mirror counterparts, which means that every note is turned upside-down in all voices. Finally, we have what CPE Bach erroneously titled the 'Fuga à 3 soggetti', an unfinished fugue which trails off in both the autograph MS and the 1751 engraving before the almost certain reintroduction of the original theme, whose contrapuntal compatibility with the three themes is no mere coincidence. Much ink has been spilled as to whether there is a missing fragment of the completed fugue or, as CPE Bach stated at the last bar of the truncated work, 'while working on this fugue...the composer died'.

Bach's numerological tricks and feats of compositional mathematics somewhat obscure the main purpose of the *Art of Fugue*, which is to unlock the infinite expressive possibilities of fugue to the extent that the engineering underpinning it is largely dissimulated. When compared to the angular thematic material of the *Well-tempered Clavier*, the language of the *Art of Fugue* is quite classical, achieving expressive effect not through Bach's usual methods of tonal deconstruction but rather through graceful, natural melodies based on rather consonant intervals (thirds, fifths, sixths). Furthermore, the work does not venture into particularly wayward harmonies; in fact, most of the movements stay within a narrow set of keys more or less hovering around the tonic, dominant, subdominant, and diminished seventh of the 'home' key of D and a few of its neighbouring tonalities. Nonetheless, one gets the sense of a composer honing in on the elements of what Adorno first defined as musical 'late style', when an artist in full command of his medium abandons communication with the established order in the form of exile from outer life. The composer asks us to see and to delight in the innate beauty in his machine, but ultimately, we are the ones being drawn in as opposed to him coming out to meet us at the risk of compromising his vision. Whatever the arcane elements of such a work, the timelessness of Bach's music ultimately depends on his seemingly inexhaustible ability to tap into the ineffable molecules of what we call inner life.

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