

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 23 July 2023
7.30pm

Filippo Gorini piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Art of Fugue BWV1080 (by 1742, rev. 1745-9)

Contrapunctus 1
Contrapunctus 2
Contrapunctus 3
Contrapunctus 4
Canon alla ottava
Contrapunctus 5
Contrapunctus 6 'in stylo Francese'
Contrapunctus 7 'per augmentationem et diminutionem'
Canon per augmentationem in contrario motu
Contrapunctus 8
Contrapunctus 9 'alla duodecima'
Contrapunctus 10 'alla decima'
Contrapunctus 11
Canon alla duodecima
Contrapunctus 12a (rectus)
Contrapunctus 12b (inversus)
Contrapunctus 13a (rectus)
Contrapunctus 13b (inversus)
Canon alla decima
Contrapunctus 14 (unfinished)

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Johann Sebastian Bach was the great master of canon and fugue. 'Canon' is Latin for 'rule' – witty Haydn set the Ten Commandments as vocal canons – and canons are strict forms where exactly the same musical line is combined with itself in various ways. Canons were often presented as puzzles, with no clues as to how the line was to be combined with itself. One of Bach's puzzle canons was solved by three other composers, including no less a figure than Telemann, who all proudly published their solution. Bach was so pleased with another of his puzzles, in three parts, that he displayed it to the viewer in a portrait. It took a hundred years to solve that one; it was written as a membership test for a musical correspondence society. Bach was particularly pleased to be asked to join, since Händel had recently become a member, and the canon pays tribute to Bach's much more famous contemporary in a number of ways. The a-umlaut of the German way of writing 'Händel' can also be written as æ, and so Bach allowed his fascination with numerology to run free.

G F H A E N D E L
 7 6 8 1 5 13 4 5 11

H for Handel = 8. Add all the numbers together and you get 60. The first bar of the canon has 8 notes, and the whole solution has 60 notes. The bass line is taken from a Handel chaconne. The solution of the puzzle is that all three parts enter after one bar, but upside down.

Master of the canon though he was, Bach's name is even more associated with fugue. A fugue usually has a fixed number of 'voices' or contrapuntal parts, generally three or four. It has a main theme, called a Subject, which appears in succession – sometimes in quick succession, in a device known as *stretto* – in the different voices: any voice can start. Once a voice has entered with the Subject, it generally moves on to what is called the Countersubject, which fits contrapuntally with the Subject, now appearing in the next voice to enter. Often a second Countersubject follows. The 'exposition' of the fugue (during which all the voices enter) usually sticks to the tonic key: thereafter, other keys will be visited for the sake of variety. Entries of the Subject in various voices will be separated by freer sections (episodes), which may introduce new material. The actual shape of a fugue is so variable that 'fugue' is better regarded as a texture, a technique, than a form.

Bach spent his last decade on earth putting together various compendiums of contrapuntal technique. In the *Goldberg Variations*, composed in 1742, every third variation is a two-part canon, sometimes with an independent bass line. In the first canon, the two voices start on the same note. In the next, the pursuing voice begins one note higher – 'Canone alla Seconda', writes Bach. Next, two notes higher – 'alla Terza', and so on, until the last one is a

Canon at the Ninth. 'What diversity! What perfection of the hands and of expression this art requires!' exclaimed Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach, the composer's son.

In the Spring of 1747, Bach paid a visit to Berlin, where Carl Philipp Emanuel was one of the royal musicians. The musical monarch, Frederick the Great, gave his visitor a motive in C minor, upon which Bach immediately improvised a three-part fugue. Returning to Leipzig, he thought further into the motive's possibilities, and by July he was able to send Frederick a 'Musical Offering' of canons, fugues and a whole Trio Sonata, based on the King's Theme. The first canon is a single line of music to be played by two musicians standing opposite each other reading from the same piece of paper, each starting at the top left-hand corner as usual: that's to say, the line combines with itself backwards and upside down. They get more complicated after that.

Bach composed his *Musical Offering* the same summer he wrote his Handelian canon for the Musical Correspondence Society. The Society also required a further composition as 'proof of skill', so Bach wrote a set of Canonic Variations for organ on the Christmas hymn 'Vom Himmel hoch'.

Next, Bach's compositional focus turned to his last, great, unfinished work, *Art of Fugue*, a collection of 14 fugues (one also provided with a fuller version for *two* harpsichords) and four canons, all based on the same Subject, which is given every possible twist of fugal treatment – inverted, augmented, and, most amazingly, mirrored in such a way that a whole fugue can be turned upside-down with the bass becoming the treble, and still make perfect sense. The incomplete last piece is a triple fugue – a fugue on three successive subjects, of which the last is Bach's name: B♭ is called B in German, and B♯ is called H, so B-A-C-H is yet another arcane detail for Bach to fit into his music from time to time. The main Subject does not appear, and many scholars decided this final fugue was not part of *Art of Fugue*. Then in 1880, Gustav Nottebohm, who is best known for his work on Beethoven's indecipherable sketch-books, realized that the three subjects could combine with the principal Subject: Bach was about to do this when he died. This musical equivalent of Fermat's Last Theorem has spawned completions by several composers and musicologists, including Busoni and Donald Tovey: but many music-lovers prefer the incomplete fugue to break off short before the crowning contrapuntal achievement is even heard. The sudden silence invites everyone to contemplate their own mortality.

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