WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 3 March 2024
7.00pm

This concert is supported by W. Stephen Croddy

# Die Kunst der Fuge BWV1080

**Sir András Schiff** piano
**Schaghajegh Nosrati** piano

Lecture

Interval

Performance

**Johann Sebastian Bach**
(1685-1750)

Art of Fugue BWV1080 (by 1742, rev. 1745-9)
*Contrapunctus 1 • Contrapunctus 2 •*
*Contrapunctus 3 • Contrapunctus 4 •*
*Canon in Hypodiapason • Contrapunctus 5 •*
*Contrapunctus 6 [per Diminutionem] in Stylo Francese •*
*Canon per Augmentationem in Contrario Motu •*
*Contrapunctus 7 per Augmentationem et Diminutionem •*
*Contrapunctus 8 • Canon alla Duodecima •*
*Contrapunctus 9 alla Duodecima • Canon alla Decima •*
*Contrapunctus 10 alla Decima • Contrapunctus 11 •*
*Contrapunctus [12] rectus • Contrapunctus 12 inversus •*
*Contrapunctus [13] rectus* • Contrapunctus [13] inversus* •*
*[Contrapunctus 14]*
**in the version for two pianos*

*We ask the audience for some moments of silence after the last, unfinished fugue*

*Art of Fugue*, the last and greatest demonstration of Bach's unrivalled contrapuntal mastery, is a work that has been surrounded by mystique ever since it was first published, 12 months or so after his death. That mystique has arisen largely out of two aspects of the score as Bach left it: in the first place, the work is incomplete, with the fugue clearly intended to stand as the work's culmination breaking off just a few bars after it introduces a new subject based on the notes which 'spelled' the composer's own name, B-A-C-H (or, in our own musical nomenclature, the notes Bb-A-C-B♮); and secondly, the music is notated in 'open' score – i.e. with a separate stave assigned to each contrapuntal voice – and with no indication of the instruments on which it is to be played. The latter feature is easily explained: complex contrapuntal works of this kind designed at least in part to fulfil a pedagogical function were often published in this form. In 1747 Bach had joined the Society of Musical Sciences founded by the mathematician and musical philosopher Lorenz Christoph Mizler. The Society's rules required members from time to time to submit a 'scientific' musical work, and Bach's first contribution was a set of Canonic Variations on the chorale melody 'Vom Himmel hoch'. Although the variations were clearly intended for organ, they were written in open score.

In the same year that he composed the Canonic Variations, Bach presented his 'Musical Offering' to Frederick II of Prussia. It included two fugues, or 'ricercars' – one of them in three parts, the other in six. From the testimony of the King's music-master, CPE Bach, we know that both pieces had originated as keyboard improvisations by Bach himself (playing, no doubt, on the fortepiano of which the King was the proud owner), and yet the six-part ricercar was again published in open score. As for *Art of Fugue*, there can be little doubt that it, too, was intended for study and performance at the keyboard – not the organ (the lowest part is not written in idiomatic pedal-style, and the topmost voice extends beyond the range found in Bach's organ works), but the more readily-available harpsichord.

When CPE Bach, together with his brother-in-law Johann Christoph Altnikol, prepared *Art of Fugue* for publication in 1751, they appended Bach's very last composition, the valedictory chorale prelude 'Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein'. Its inclusion was explained in a prefatory note to the score:

> The late author of this work was prevented by his disease of the eyes, and by his death, which followed shortly upon it, from bringing the last fugue, in which at the entrance of the third subject he mentions himself by name, to conclusion; accordingly it was wished to compensate the friends of his muse by including the four-part church chorale added at the end, which the deceased man in his blindness dictated on the spur of the moment to the pen of a friend.

A second edition, issued in the following year, contained an extended introduction by the prominent theorist Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, who pointed out that the work contained 'the most hidden beauties possible to the art of music'. Nevertheless, to the younger composers of the mid-18th Century, including Bach's own sons, *Art of Fugue* must have seemed like the product of a bygone age. 30 years later, Mozart's style was radically influenced by his excited discovery of the music of Bach and Handel, but it was not until the late compositions of Beethoven that their works provided the springboard for a radically forward-looking musical language. *Art of Fugue* is in essence a gigantic chain of fugal variations on a single theme. So, too, is the fugal finale of Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 130, and the line that links the two works is a palpably direct one. It comes as no surprise to learn that the inventory of Beethoven's possessions at the time of his death included both a handwritten copy and a printed edition of *Art of Fugue*. Beethoven had known Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* since his boyhood, too, and although on occasion he openly expressed greater reverence for Handel, Bach became an increasingly strong influence in his final years.

Bach actually composed the bulk of *Art of Fugue* in the early 1740s. His autograph score of that time contains 12 fugues and two canons, all based on the same subject; but it is clear that two further canons added at a later date, as well as two new fugues – one of them *Contrapunctus 4*, the other the incomplete final fugue incorporating Bach's own name – were intended to round out the collection. In addition, Bach extended each of the first three fugues with a coda, enhancing the music's weight and grandeur. The whole work stands as a systematic survey of fugal and canonic techniques, and a breathtaking display of contrapuntal skill. But for all their astonishing ingenuity the pieces remain first and foremost profoundly great music.

The ordering of the fugues in Bach's own incomplete manuscript is devised to demonstrate a progressive increase in contrapuntal complexity, and the composer's scheme was largely, though not completely, respected in the published edition. The latter begins with two pairs of fugues, the first pair using the theme in its original form, and the second pair in inversion. These are followed by a 'counter fugue' which has both forms appearing simultaneously. After this comes a pair (*Contrapuncti 6* and *7*) in which the subject is rhythmically varied; and a group using new fugue subjects that are eventually combined with the original theme. Two 'mirror' fugues (*Contrapuncti 12* and *13*) are followed by four two-part canons, and finally by the incomplete quadruple fugue. (The original edition also inadvertently included - as *Contrapunctus 14* - a

preliminary version of No. 10, as well as a transcription for two keyboards of the second in the pair of 'mirror' fugues.) In tonight's performance of *Art of Fugue* the canons are interspersed among the fugues, in order to provide variety of form and texture.

The opening fugue presents the subject in its plain, unadorned form, and the piece stands almost as a statement of intent. It is in a sense the 'theme' on which the remaining variations are based, and its austere, old-fashioned style makes its surprisingly dramatic ending, with 'stabbing' chords separated by pauses, all the more effective. The final five bars, presenting an additional statement of the theme in the tenor part, were added by Bach at a late stage.

In *Contrapunctus 2*, the theme's tail-end is enlivened by means of a new dotted rhythm. While the opening fugue had presented the initial entries of the theme in two pairs, with the upper two voices answered by the lower two, this one has them progressing from the bottom of the texture to the top. The piece originally concluded with a syncopated version of the theme in the tenor; but Bach's revised ending, with a further thematic entry in the top line, lends the closing moments considerably greater finality.

*Contrapunctus 3* makes use for the first time of the subject's inverted form. The intensely chromatic piece unfolds as a series of increasingly elaborate fugal variations. The first variation fills in the inverted subject's rising arpeggio shape with passing-notes; while the second, introduced shortly before the close, presents the elaborated form in a dotted and partially syncopated guise.The following fugue is one of the pieces that was added in the first printed edition, and it is noticeably more symmetrical in design and more flowing in execution than the fugues that surround it. This is another number based on the inversion of the subject.

In *Contrapunctus 5*, Bach presents his fugue subject both in its original shape and in inversion, with the initial fugal entries alternating between the two forms. This is a *stretto* fugue, in which the entry of the fugal answer overlaps with the conclusion of the preceding statement. The 'tightness', or *stretto*, with which the successive entries appear varies during the course of the piece, and towards the end statement and answer are heard in the inner parts at a distance of no more than a single bar, while the concluding moments, as the music turns from minor to major, have the two thematic forms actually sounded simultaneously.

*Contrapunctus 6* is another *tour de force* of contrapuntal ingenuity, once more presenting the subject in *rectus* and *inversus* forms combined, but this time additionally bringing into play a process of diminution, whereby the theme is heard simultaneously in its original note-values, and at double-speed. As in the preceding fugue dotted rhythm is prevalent, and the first edition described the piece as being *in Stile francese* – in other words, in the stately style of the opening section of a French Overture. There is scarcely a single bar in which the subject does not appear in at least two different forms at once, and in the concluding bars Bach adds a fifth voice, while an even more richly-scored final cadence to bring the music to a grandiose conclusion.

*Contrapunctus 7* carries the notion of notion of varied speeds a stage further. The fugue bears the heading of 'Per Augmentationem et Diminutionem'; and to the two metrical forms on which the preceding *Contrapunctus* had been based, Bach adds an augmented version of the subject, allowing it to unfold in note-values of twice their original duration, both in its original shape, and in inversion, so that the subject is heard in three different speeds simultaneously virtually throughout. Again, the expansion of the texture at the end to encompass five real parts is carried out on a grand scale.

Although *Contrapunctus 8* is scored for three parts, rather than four, it is actually one of the longest and most intricate fugues in the collection. In its form, and even its thematic substance, it is closely related to *Contrapunctus 11*: both are triple fugues, and both culminate in a climactic fugal exposition that has all three subjects played simultaneously. Moreover, *Contrapunctus 11* revisits the fugue subjects of the earlier piece, presenting them in a different order, and inverted. *Contrapunctus 8* falls into two halves, with the demarcation-point signalled by a sudden flurry of demisemiquaver activity in the lowest part. Following this moment, Bach introduces his third fugue subject – a version of the main theme of *Art of Fugue* in its inverted form, with its individual phrases separated by rests. (It is with the mirror-image of this halting version of the main theme that *Contrapunctus 11* begins.)

In Bach's manuscript of *Art of Fugue* two double fugues were followed by a pair of triple fugues. However, the published edition of the work - perhaps simply with a view to accommodating the individual pieces more neatly on the printed page - altered the sequence: the double fugues appeared as Nos. 9 and 10, and the triple as Nos. 8 and 11. *Contrapunctus 9* is the first in a pair of double fugues based on new subjects. In both cases, the original *Art of Fugue* theme appears during the course of the piece as a countersubject to the new fugue theme. In No. 9 the basic theme is heard in augmentation (i.e. in long note-values) no fewer than seven times, while the 'running' figuration of the new subject continues unabated.

Bach's original version of *Contrapunctus 10* began with the inverted form of the work's main theme, but he subsequently added an introductory exposition based on what he had at first conceived as a countersubject to the theme. That opening

exposition is striking, because the second pair of voices enters with an inversion of the material of the first pair. However, the initial half of the subject presented at the outset is clearly divided into two groups of three notes each (they are separated by a rest), of which the second is the exact inversion of the first. As a result, when the lowest voice enters with the inversion of the entire subject, the impression it imparts is that the individual three-note groups remain exactly as they were, but are now heard in reverse order; and as if this were not already complicated enough, the latter stage of the piece combines the two subjects, to form a double fugue in invertible counterpoint.

The first of the three subjects presented in the elaborate *Contrapunctus 11* is a rhythmically altered form of the work's main fugue subject, with its notes 'filled in', as they had been in Nos. 5 and 6, and its three-note phrases separated by rests, as in *Contrapunctus 10*. Once this initial fugal exposition has run its course, Bach introduces a new subject based on chromatic scale patterns. Again, the subject is explored at length, before the appearance of the third subject, characterised by its constant quaver motion and its repeated notes. This final subject (it contains a hidden allusion to the B-A-C-H motif) is heard from the outset in contrapuntal combination with the second subject. This is the most imposing of the fugues Bach completed for the collection – a breathtaking demonstration of his contrapuntal mastery, and one whose climax is marked by the simultaneous sounding of all three subjects.

*Contrapunctus 12*, like the three-part No. 13, is a 'mirror' fugue designed to be played through in two forms: once *rectus*, and the other *inversus*, either with the two versions simultaneously (according to Bach's autograph, in which case a second keyboard player is required), or one after the other (following the first edition). In the latter form the entire fabric of the music – not only its thematic material, but also its texture – is turned upside-down, to form a complementary piece that is an exact mirror image of the first. In addition, in No. 13 each successive voice is an inversion of the last, so that in effect a double mirror transformation ensues. The varied form of the work's main subject used here, with its octave-drop and its 'running' triplets, was clearly the inspiration behind the fugal finale of Brahms's E minor Cello Sonata Op. 38.

The first in the series of two-voiced canons in the first edition of *Art of Fugue* is a *Canon per Augmentationem in Contrario Motu*. The piece is accurately described by its title: the answering voice imitates the first by inversion, and at half-speed, so that the distance between the two becomes progressively larger by two-bar increments as the piece unfolds. By the time the lower voice reaches the cascading flurry of notes that had been heard in the upper line halfway through the first half, the gap between the two canonic voices is more than 20 bars, and it has long since become all but impossible for the listener to follow the canonic process at work. However, at the exact mid-point the roles of the voices are reversed, and the whole scheme begins again. This is in any case a 'perpetual' canon, with the upper voice eventually working its way round to the music of its first bar, at which point a large-scale repeat is indicated, and the process could theoretically be carried on *ad infitum*.

A good deal more straightforward is the *Canon all' Ottava* (or *Canon in Hypodiapason*, as it is called in the composer's autograph score), in which the answering voice occurs an octave below the first, at a distance of four bars. Here, the work's main subject appears in a decorated version, and transformed into gigue rhythm. The piece is again a perpetual canon incorporating a seamless repeat.

The *Canon at the Tenth*, in which the inverted subject appears in syncopated form, is a dazzling display of both contrapuntal skill and keyboard virtuosity. It demonstrates the art of canonic writing at two different melodic intervals. The first half of the piece, in which the lower part takes the lead, has the imitating voice entering at the interval of a tenth. As the imitation reaches the concluding bars of the canon that has been set forth by the lower voice, the latter launches into an elaborate 'running' passage that leads into the canon's second half. Here, the upper part takes the lead, restating exactly the same canonic line that had been given out by the lower voice in the first half, but transposing it up an octave. However, the answer in the lower voice now occurs at the same pitch as at the outset of the piece, so that the canon thenceforth proceeds at the octave. At the end the lower voice appends a statement of the initial syncopated version of the subject at double-speed, while the upper part takes wing in a flight of fancy that culminates in a brief cadenza (not notated by Bach) that serves to underline the virtuoso nature of the piece as a whole.

The *Canon alla Duodecima* ('at the twelfth') is yet another perpetual canon, based this time on an elaborately ornamented form of the theme in which its initial notes are expanded into a wave-like figuration. One of the striking features of the piece is the fact that the voices proceed at a distance of fully eight bars, so that again it is hard to keep track of the strict imitation, particularly since at the mid-point of the canon, without any interruption in the music's flow, the two voices exchange roles, and the upper one now leads.

There has been much debate as to how much of the final fugue *a 3 soggetti* is missing. The fragment as it stands is already on an imposing scale, but having introduced a new subject near its close, in the shape of the B A C H motif, Bach would surely have gone on to elaborate it at some length. Some commentators

have even expressed doubt as to whether the piece was intended to form part of *Art of Fugue* at all, since the work's main subject does not appear in it. However, the 19th-century musicologist Gustav Nottebohm (famous for his pioneering researches into Beethoven's sketchbooks) demonstrated that the three new subjects could be combined with the main theme in quadruple counterpoint, and it is likely that Bach would have been holding this trump card up his sleeve. Various brave souls have attempted to complete the fugue (they include the pianist and music analyst Donald Francis Tovey and the organists Helmut Walcha and Lionel Rogg), but tonight's performance puts aside all such speculative ventures, and does not proceed beyond the point where Bach's autograph breaks off. In an attempt to provide some sort of a conclusion, the first edition came to a halt on a held imperfect cadence; but the composer's manuscript continues for a further seven precious bars, and there is something infinitely affecting about the way it tails off in midstream with Bach's own musical signature reverberating in the lower of the two middle voices.