J.S. BACH - THE ART OF FUGUE

Few works by Johann Sebastian Bach have been a target for so much speculation as well as being the subject for profound scientific studies as this particular cycle, which is also seen as his "swansong": *The Art of Fugue*. Some of the mysteries surrounding this work began in fact promptly after the death of Bach on 28 July 1750. At that time, his son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote on the unfinished manuscript of the extensive final fugue, precisely at the point where the name B.A.C.H. appears in notes (b-a-c-h, which in German B sounds like B flat and H sounds like B): "On this fugue, where the name B.A.C.H. is used in the countersubject, the author has died". Hereby it indicates that *The Art of Fugue* is indeed Bach's last work and consequently also the last thing he has written.

Meanwhile research has proved that this is not the case, even if it is conclusive that the last fugue of *The Art of Fugue* remained incomplete due to the composer dying sooner that he had expected after two eye operations. In reality Bach must have actually started on this cycle of fugues around 1740 and possibly even earlier. Moreover, it is unlikely that he had not written the last great fugue in the form of a plan before he wrote it out fully, i.e. with all the main and counter themes set out under each other. Finally it is also worth mentioning that the title *The Art of Fugue* is not Bach's. He had not named the fugues as such, but labeled them individually as "contrapunctus", the sounding of note against note and part against part.

Bach began in 1742, at the very latest, to write down parts of *The Art of Fugue*. He did that following the example of a long tradition of complex contrapuntal works traceable back to the works of Buxtehude via Froberger to Frescobaldi, on four staves each with its own clef as if applicable for four-part vocal work: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. This facilitated the reading of the separate polyphonic parts for everyone, because there is no doubt that from the very beginning it would become a method in the technique and playing of the fugue. And hereby was the playing and being able to play a fugue, however complex and in spite of the notation in four staves, unequivocally bound to the klavier. That Bach's work does not appear out of the blue is expressed in a comment from Johann Mattheson in 1739 in *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister*, in which he writes about his own collection of fugues and hopes that a similar cycle like that of the famous "Herr Bach in Leipzig der ein grosser Fugenmeister ist" will emerge.

In 1746, the manuscript must have been rounded off and Bach gets ready for the preparation of the printing plates. At the same time he would have reconsidered the contents of his educational material and begun again to polish each individual fugue and the cycle as an entity. Hereby two versions of this opus magnum emerged, one which was ready for printing more or less in the form of the cycle made in 1746 and the other one with the supplements and corrections made after 1746 until just before his death. The original manuscript of *The Art of Fugue* is made up of fifteen compositions. The first edition had twenty-one: seventeen fugues and four canons. The preparation for a printed edition was not furthered because Bach's sight, already in 1749, was becoming more impaired. When Bach died in the summer of 1750, his widow and son Carl Philipp Emanuel undoubtedly must have wondered what to do. It was decided to print the work based on subscriptions.

So, in May 1751, in the "*Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehsamkeit*" the readers were kindly invited to subscribe to *The Art of Fugue*. The first edition appeared in the autumn of the same year in Leipzig. A second edition followed in the spring of 1752 with an introduction written by the music theorist Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg from Berlin. "Anyone who has any knowledge of art cannot fail to notice immediately that all the distinguishing types of fugue and "contrapuncten" occurring here are set on the same main theme in D minor, or D-la-Re in a minor third and that all the parts flow continually, one voice with as much force as the other." So says Marpurg. Indeed no-one can fail to notice that unlike in the two books of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* where each fugue has its own theme, here a single central subject has lead to a most impressive collection of fugues, canons and numerous contrapuntal techniques, in brief, to a training school in the genre.

Bach had been fascinated by the old and scholarly art of the canon and the fugue throughout his life. Perhaps a fair comparison is the solving of numerical and word puzzles. Composers and theorists have grappled with the phenomenon of literal imitation of a melody or theme since the early fourteenth century. Two closely related streams have gradually developed from this technique of "imitatio"; the canon (absolutely strict "imitatio") and the fugue (in which parts can imitate each other in numerous ways, but where simultaneously, short passages occur and the different imitation techniques can be mixed). Particularly the perpetual canon (which goes on indefinitely) provides the creator with the pleasure of developing a theme that can be read from left to right (making a perfect canon) but also from right to left (canon cancrizans or crab canon also resulting in a perfect canon). In addition the same can be written with different lengths of notes or as a mirror canon (in which case all rising intervals fall and vice versa) plus combinations of this.

The first canonic compositions by Bach that we can trace date back to soon after 1713, his Weimar period. In most cases it concerns enigmatic canons, that is to say, from which the recipient (a friend of pupil) must discover the key to the puzzle in order to decipher the canon in question and perform it. Around 1747, Bach composed no less than fourteen different perpetual canons based on the first eight bass notes of the theme (the aria) of the *Goldberg Variations*, each canon more complex than its predecessor. At the same time he composed five canonic variations on the carol "*Von Himmel hoch da komm ich her*" and ten canons as part of his "*Musikalisches Opfer*".

It is without a doubt that Bach's passion for the complex theory of the canon in the year 1747 is a follow up of his membership of the "Correspondirende Societät der Musikalischen Wissenschaften" in the summer of that year. This society was founded by Lorenz Mizler who had studied briefly under Bach. The society encouraged the members to deepen themselves in the old learned theories of counterpoint, polyphony, the canon and other academically regarded composition technique. The members of the Societät der Musikalischen Wissenschaften, including Telemann and Graun, received copies of the canons and discussed their form and technique.

Bach had little interest in the latter. But he must have experienced pleasure in rendering sufficient musical substance to the most complex of canon technique and making this also enjoyable as music. This heroic feat especially characterises *The Art of Fugue*. Anyone who analyses the fugues and canons will be amazed at the growing

complexity and inventiveness in which Bach using one fugue after the other repeatedly demonstrates a new facet of the theme, another aspect of the polyphony. He uses ways in which the different variants of the theme imitate each other or provide a contrast with each other. Counterpoint (polyphonic second voice) is used and is gradually woven together in a growing complexity of themes. All this is achieved without losing for one moment the musical flow, the melodic, rhythmic and above all the harmonic power of expression and without submitting to theoretic or artificial formulas.

The first four fugues of *The Art of Fugue* provide a concise outline of the possibilities of the theme: in the original form (fugues 1 and 2), gradually with small rhythmic changes and syncopation, and mirror fugues (fugues 3 and 4). In the following group of three fugues, Bach has set the original form of the theme and the mirrored theme face to face and moreover has overlapped the entries (in stretto: therefore entering quickly before the subject is completed). Also the rhythmic variations are used abundantly. The sixth fugue is written with so much ornamentation and rapid appoggiaturas (or fast turns), that it credits the title "in stylo francese" in the French style. The seventh fugue presents the theme in shorter notes (by diminution) as well as longer notes (by augmentation) and also with semi-quavers a little similar to the Italian style.

The real juggling of the themes gets going in the eighth fugue. This fugue is written in three parts (like fugue 13) and consists of three different themes of which the first two are completely new and the main theme is so varied that it does not immediately register as such. The gentle chromaticism together with the many workings of rapid passages makes this fugue a modest spectacle that concludes with a triple fugue in which the three themes are set against each other. The ninth fugue provides some technical respite. In spite of the fast semi-quavers passages it is clear and well set out not diminishing the radiance of the music.

The tenth fugue, "contrapunctus 10 a 4, alla Decima", as stated in the first edition, marks even more than the previous fugues Bach's impressive "Gradus ad Parnassus". Rules do not count any more. He invents them himself and combines the new themes in the root position and mirrors them face to face, uses reflected, rhythmic varied versions of the main theme and finally blends everything together in a combined double fugue. In the eleventh fugue Bach continues this way but then more compact and using faster runs in the unraveled main theme. The gentle chromaticism that conjures up the musical imagery is noticeable here just as before in the eighth fugue. The twelfth and thirteenth fugues are written in a special way namely as mirror fugues, that is to say that the first version of the fugue (rectus) is just played backwards for the second version (inversus): all falling intervals rise and vice versa. This results in both versions in a skillful fugal composition with powerful expression…The twelfth fugue is in a more rigid style and the thirteenth emits an unfathomable expressive and virtuosic radiation.

In order to finish the whole cycle of *The Art of Fugue* with the majestic fourteenth fugue, the four canons are performed first. In the first edition, the first one is called "Canon in Hypodiapason", canon at the octave in which Bach has written the theme on a single stave and the second part enters after four beats as an exact version of the

first part but an octave lower. Above the second canon,“Canon alla Decima-contrapunto alla Terza”, is written; therefore a canon in which the second part enters after four beats an octave plus a third higher. After a linking passage in the middle a second canon enters an octave apart. The third canon is called “Canon alla Duodecima-contrapunto alla Quinta”. The interval is now an octave plus a fifth in which the second voice enters only after eight beats. The fourth canon that is called “Canon per augmentationen in contrariu motu” concerns a canon in which the written part (because Bach has once more only written a single part, the second part can always derive from it!) is followed after two beats by the same part, but then a fourth lower and moreover mirrored with the length of the notes doubled.

As the conclusion to *The Art of Fugue* we come to the fourteenth incomplete fugue. Like the title of the textbook Gradus ad Parnassum (1725) by J.J.Fux, Bach has also made a journey to the Parnassus. \In his case his route is made via a number of almost encyclopedic-like masterworks, in which all the studied technique of his time have accumulated in brilliant music which resounds still in our time: *The Well-tempered Clavier*, *Goldberg Variations*, *The Musical Offering* and finally *The Art of Fugue*. Bach uses the notes of his own name in his last fugue B.A.C.H. and adds this as the last theme to the two other themes, a new variant on the main theme of the whole cycle and a somewhat faster moving theme. The first part of this fugue consists of a four-part fugue written over the main theme, the second section is made up of a short fugue over the second theme, on which the first two themes are combined in a double fugue. Afterwards there is the BACH theme with a four-part fugue, after which the three themes unite in what should have been a triple fugue; it does not venture further than the first entry. Research has determined that it is not inconceivable that the original version of the main theme (as in the Contrapunctus) should ultimately have been combined again with the remaining three themes in a veritable quadruple fugue! It never came to be……

Leo Samama, 2006

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