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CHAPTER I

Fugue in C Major

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1

The Well-Tempered Clavier is an exemplary collection of twice twenty-four preludes and fugues for keyboard in which Bach exhibits his unsurpassed contrapuntal virtuosity and also the seemingly infinite types, forms, and characters that may emerge—at his hands, and at his hands alone—from the art of fugue.

Some pieces are sketches for jeweled miniatures, some for vast frescos. Some are intimate and lyrical; some quiver with the intensity of passion that is equally intensely controlled; some fringe on the pedantic; and some are frankly sublime. Part of their fascination resides in the many possible attitudes from which they can be viewed, and in the manifold aspects they can assume. What seemed schematic may reveal new freshness; what seemed dull emerges as merely misunderstood; what seemed limited displays new dimensions; to what by its very

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richness and concentration has become indigestible, we return after days, months, or even years, to receive new and unanticipated nourishment and revelation. One may occasionally lay aside the *WTC*, but never because of its exhaustibility.

These are words by Ralph Kirkpatrick, the leading harpsichordist, after Landowska, of the mid-twentieth century, who recorded the *WTC* twice and wrote a book about it. Few musicians have engaged with this music more deeply.

A particularly exemplary function is usually adduced for the pair of concise fugues at the head of book 1 of the *WTC*. The Fugue in C Major, preceded by a famous and also exemplary prelude, displays maximum learning: a stretto fugue fitting two dozen entries of a one-and-a-half-bar subject into little more than two dozen bars of music. Strettos come at many different time and pitch intervals.

The importance that Bach attached to stretto is evident from *The Art of Fugue*, another exemplary work, which requires a whole series of stretto fugues to exemplify this most widely used of the so-called fugal devices. Stretto is formed when one voice carrying the fugue subject is “answered” by the subject in another voice before the first voice has finished. It heightens the subject in a complicated way—or, rather, in one of many complicated ways; the effect can be peremptory, intense, majestic, or serene. The Fugue in C Major uses an array of strettos to build intensity, to unsettle a fundamental rhythmic pattern, to generate modulations, and to prepare a registral climax. Another stretto brings the composition to rest.

Not even the stretto fugues of *The Art of Fugue* are as single-minded as the Fugue in C Major, whose twenty-seven bars include no episodes and, apart from subject entries, no more than a total of two bars of transitional music preparing

the fugue's three cadences . . . plus a miniature peroration in which the whole thing gently goes up in smoke, up to a high C we have never heard before. The three cadences—structural cadences—terminate and define the fugue's large sections, or phases, as it sometimes seems better to call them. The word "section" suggests something carved out in space, as with a pizza, and while "phase" is not a term usually employed by music theorists for a unit of time, the dictionary definition is suggestive: "a stage in a process of change or development."

To work many different strettos on a relatively long subject, such as this one, must also be considered an achievement. Fourteen notes is long for a subject designed for multiple strettos. The typical stretto-fugue subject runs to about half that length (six notes in the Fugue in E Major from the *WTC*, book 2).

The number fourteen carried special resonance for this composer, being the total of numbers derived from his name: 2 (B) + 1 (A) + 3 (C) + 8 (H). He chose a number to sign the beginning of the *WTC*, just as later he would personalize the end of *The Art of Fugue* with a theme: B \flat (in German terminology, B) A C B \sharp (H). He also chose to open his exemplary collection of twenty-four preludes and fugues with a fugue that brings its subject twenty-four times.

Then the next fugue in the collection has no strettos or other artifice at all, beyond contrapuntal inversion at the octave. The Fugue in C Minor is a very *knowing* fugue but it is not a *learned* fugue; it flaunts minimal learning. As Hermann Keller writes in his book on the *WTC*, it "owes its extraordinary popularity with players as much to the charm of its subject as to its easy comprehensibility and transparent polyphony. . . . This fugue is in

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everything the complete antithesis of the first one”—as we will hope to see on pages 11–15.

First Phase: Bars 1–13

In spite of the technical prowess that one might suppose this fugue was meant to demonstrate, as the flagship fugue of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, more than one commentator has exclaimed over its natural, spontaneous quality and quiet eloquence. Certainly the piece wears its learning lightly. What it really demonstrates is that learning and eloquence are not mutually exclusive: a fundamental lesson. Bach, “the deepest savant of contrapuntal arts (and even artifice), knew how to subordinate art to beauty,” a leading literary journal declared in 1788. (The anonymous writer was almost certainly Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.)

Fugues start up slowly and methodically. After one voice alone announces the fugue subject in the opening exposition—here it is the alto voice—the others enter one after another, enriching the texture from a single melodic line to two-part polyphony, three-part polyphony, and so on. Bach omits the short links usually found between some of the later voice-entries of an exposition (“merely interstitial episodes,” Tovey calls them), serving notice that this is to be a very compressed fugue. Since the subject extends over a bar and a half, its four appearances establish a definite hypermeter of three half notes’ duration.

Donald Tovey, though now a distant figure, will be cited again and again in this book. Though the center of his universe was Beethoven, as I have written elsewhere, Tovey did some of his most penetrating scholarly-critical work in reference to Bach.

The continuation of the original subject in a fugue, called the countersubject, probably deserves that name only when it is maintained as a functional feature later in the composition, along with the subject. The fluent continuation material here does not quite reach that status; yet it plays an elegant role in the fugue's exposition and conclusion. The sixteenth-note sequential figure of bars 2–3 (A G F E ∫ F E D C ∫ D C B | A) emerges from the subject's opening figure as a diminution and is itself treated to melodic inversion. Basic tools of Bach's workshop, sequence, diminution, and inversion can be applied almost unobtrusively, as here, but also more pointedly for a variety of expressive effects.

The Fugue in C Major, a four-voiced fugue, brings the subject successively in the alto, soprano, tenor, and bass and then goes on at once to a fifth entry in the soprano with a close stretto entry on its heels (saturation!). This stretto is a strict canon in the tenor at the time interval of a quarter note and the pitch interval of an upper fifth; in one contrapuntal inversion or another—that is, with the second voice entering above or below the first, in any octave—this is the main stretto that Bach will make use of throughout the piece. The fifth entry itself *confirms* the macro-metrical pulse of three half notes, and if the stretto (the sixth entry) *breaches* it, the break seems calculated to allow the next entries to march all the more strongly in the modular slow triple meter. They modulate first to G and then to A minor.

The key of A minor, the submediant, is affirmed by the fugue's first strong cadence—though as often happens with structural articulations in Baroque music, the music starts up again at once in the tonic key C major without any modulatory process. Bach prepares this cadence as briefly as possible, or just about. It is interesting that he also wanted to make it as

expressive as possible, as though to counteract the rather dry, abstract nature of the basic material. He did the same with the next cadence (in D minor).

Second Phase: Bars 14–19

In this small stretch of music much happens. Starting in C major with the “default” stretto we already know—it therefore sounds as though we are starting all over again—Bach lays down a barrage of further stretto entries at different time intervals and different scale degrees. Several entries are reinforced by doubling in thirds [*bars 15, 17, 19*].

This classic pileup is one of the passages Laurence Dreyfus has in mind when he refers delicately in his book *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* to the “irritations” in Bach’s voice leading—awkward sounds in certain of the canonic dispositions “that he attempted to eliminate, perhaps without achieving an unqualified success.” But these attempts, by adding ingenious covering counterpoint in the noncanonic voices, contribute to some of the most expressive moments in the fugue, as Dreyfus points out.

He cites bars 17–19. The A-minor cadence in bar 14 had activated a run of subject entries all starting from the pitches C and G in one octave or another, but now they are topped by a tenor entry starting from A [*bars 17–18*]. The melodic line moves up to D and then to F, the tenor’s highest note in the fugue so far. The upper voices also rise to the top of their ranges around now; the soprano, as usual, is the voice to watch, for the curling eighth-note scale that it traces invests the registral climax with special power and radiance. This scale merges two entries, one incomplete and the other complete [*bars 15–17*], advancing from

EXAMPLE 1

G above middle C up to the higher C and then to high F, A, and ultimately B \flat , just one note short of the top of Bach's keyboard.

The harmony tilts expansively to the subdominant, as the texture opens up in bars 16–17—where I always hear a spectral fifth voice, according to the model in example 1. (It is not uncommon for Bach to divide a fugue subject, clearly heard, between two voices.) What I am hearing is the dazzling eruption of high trumpets and drums in the *Gratias* of the B-Minor Mass, a fugue with evident points of contact with the present *WTC* fugue.

Third Phase: Bars 19–27

The climactic high B \flat in the soprano echoes a moment later in a bass entry pointed toward the next cadential goal, D minor [*bar 18*]. D minor balances the previous minor key, A minor. (The large-scale tonal progression from here to the end of the fugue, the circle of fifths A–D–G–C, will be articulated by pedals in the bass.) But a “default” stretto at the upper fifth overlaps the actual cadence and casts a strange filtered light over it. A novel effect, this seems to arise from a compound of the unexpected D-major harmony—with F \sharp —the pause on the pedal D, brief as it is, and the way the two inner voices ease their way or glide across the cadential downbeat. B \natural also rather pointedly contradicts the climactic B \flat s heard earlier [*bar 19*].

The progression conveys something of the mood of an interrupted, or deceptive, cadence, though technically it cannot be called that, of course, and to call the D-major chord a *tierce de Picardie* also seems odd, for Picardy mode-change is supposed to happen to the tonic chord at the end of a composition, not to the dominant of the dominant somewhere in the middle. At key points earlier in the fugue—after the exposition, and after the A-minor cadence—the function of the default stretto was to move the music forward. By this time it feels valedictory, almost nostalgic.

It initiates a beautifully calculated slowdown. After the stately momentum of the first phase of this fugue, and the whirl of virtuosic exertion in the second, the concluding phase brings a peaceful stretto that feels like a duplication, *stretto* without *sforzato*, without stress [*bars 20–24*]. This stretto is drawn out at the lower sixth over a pedal G.

One more, final stretto comes above the third and longest pedal, a prolongation of the cadential note C [*bars 24–27*]. Tinges of subdominant harmony relax the music further—how precisely the Bbs are positioned in bars 24–26—and relaxation also extends to the form of the subject. As a general rule, the statement of the subject that comes at or near the end of a fugue makes a definitive statement, sometimes aphoristic or witty, sometimes climactic or monumental. Not here. What we get here is a very informal and mild free entry in the soprano, which skips a few beats while restoring (with some help from the alto) its long-forgotten continuation, that sequential figure in sixteenth notes (A G F E ∫ F E D C). With which the soprano guides the melodic line back down to its opening note, the tonic, C [*bars 24–26*].

The music is coming to a close—heretofore the subject has ended less conclusively, on the third degree, not the tonic—and on C the subject converges with C in the pedal, two octaves below. Still, this turns out to be rather fragile as a place of rest, and the wispy upward scales at the end do not contribute much to stability. Perhaps they are Bach's way of nudging us to move right along to the next number, the antithetical Prelude and Fugue in C Minor.