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## **Bach Art of Fugue (final contrapunctus)**

With the Art of Fugue, a veritable Bible of fugal techniques and expression, Bach produced a monumental edifice. (The idea of fugue, for the uninitiated, is that of a musical form which deals with a number of voices all discoursing on shared thematic material, a “subject,” in much the same way debates focus on a subject.) A compilation of fugues based on a single subject (and its variations), the Art of Fugue seems to be an exhaustive study of the possibilities of the form, a composer testing his mettle, expanding his horizons. It has long been debated whether the work is in fact a study, theoretical or conceptual, never meant to be performed. Were it meant to be performed there is much speculation on what instrumentation was intended; is it a keyboard work, a work for a consort of like instruments, for a broken consort, a vocal group? The piece is written in “open score” – on four staves, one per part, with no other indications. There is much room for discussion, for scholarly musings and musicological excavation. What is clear to us is that this is a golden treasure trove of riveting musical rhetoric, elevated, intricately woven round-table discussions which make for an engaging concert experience. It is music for which we have a deep love and which we feel we can bring to life effectively through the medium of the string quartet.

The Art of Fugue as a whole forms a sort of treatise comprising a set of discussions related to a common theme. Imagine hosting a series of fascinating evenings devoted to discoursing on politics, or a specific political problem, dealing with one main insight on each such evening. In much the same way as such a series of evening sessions would, we find that this set of fugues exhibits a certain shared “aboutness,” rooted in descent from a common fugue subject. Sometimes other, secondary subjects are brought in to comment on and shed light on the first (such as in Contrapunctus XI, which has two additional subjects), or a theme is turned upside down to be viewed from a new angle (Contrapuncti IV, VI and XI), or it is stated rather more slowly or quickly in order to lend it a different weight (Contrapunctus VII). Parts support or challenge one another. All these are familiar concepts to anyone who has been engaged in fruitful debate, and make for stimulating repartee.

Such a mammoth achievement from the great composer’s last days comes to us only incomplete, as the final fugue (Contrapunctus XVIII) trails off unended, thus inviting romantic speculation. There is the most likely apocryphal story of Bach dying as he dictated the final fugue, having just incorporated his own name as a musical cipher into the fabric of the piece. Of all the parts of the Art of Fugue, this final, unfinished fugue is the lengthiest, even truncated as it is,

and arguably the loftiest as well. Alone in this work it does not feature the subject common to all the other fugues, although its first subject can be understood as a variation on it. Instead it features fugal writing on three different subjects that get intertwined as the piece progresses. The third of these subjects is Bach's own name, spelled out in pitches (H being the German signifier of our B-natural) as if he were signing his own piece. Just after the integration of all three themes the piece breaks off. It has been shown, however, that these themes can all be combined with a fourth, the fourth being the principal subject of the entire Art of Fugue, thus gloriously contextualizing this much mused-on subject as the crowning achievement of the entire work. Without the final section, the main subject remains implied, its aura having been fully illuminated. It is rather like figuring out who a man is through his influence on others, or learning the story of the life of Jesus through the accounts of competing gospels. We are able to arrive at the fullest truth of the subject by encountering its reflections in other themes that fit with it. And although I would give (almost) anything to know the rest of this beautiful, haunting piece, I also believe that as it stands it makes a moving and powerful statement. It is the torso of a magnificent, powerful ancient sculpture, and we apprehend it even without direct knowledge of its entirety.

Note by Mark Steinberg