

THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH¹

CLASS 3 Oct 5 FUGUE AND COUNTERPOINT; DANCE; PERFORMANCE STYLE

Outline

1. Fugue, polyphony, counterpoint. The fugue is the most controlled of musical styles, yet can also be one of the most expressive. Central paradox of Bach's music: structured and controlled, shown most clearly in his mastery of the fugue, yet also intensely emotional.
2. Importance of dance in the Baroque. The vigor of dance rhythms is one reason for J.S. Bach's wide appeal.
3. Nineteenth and early twentieth century performing styles differed greatly from those practiced in Bach's time. To fill the large concert halls, orchestras and choruses, modern ensembles are generally larger, modern instruments louder and brighter sounding, and modern voices fuller and more dramatic than in Bach's time. In the last 60 years, many performers have shifted back toward historically-informed performance practices to present the music of Bach and other Baroque composers.

Musical selections from

- The Well-tempered Clavier
- Sonata No. 1 for solo Violin in G-minor
- Contrapunctus I and IX from The Art of Fugue
- Choral fugues from Cantata 19/1, Cantata 21/ 2 etc.; Cantata 38/1; or other cantatas; B-minor Mass

- Bourée from Partita No 1 for solo violin, Chorus 1 from BWV 248/III, Christmas Oratorio, , Badinerie from Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B-minor, end of Fugue in E-flat for organ ("St. Anne"), Gigue from Partita No. 3 for solo violin
- Cantata 65/4 bass aria with pair of oboes da caccia
- Christmas Oratorio III/1

- Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, recordings by Wilhelm Fürtwangler and the Vienna Philharmonic, compared with Reinhardt Goebel and Musica Antiqua Köln.

Fugue, Polyphony, Counterpoint

Fugue is a musical form for three, four, or occasionally more voices (musical lines) in which each voice states the theme in turn, followed by elaboration in which the theme returns, often in several voices at the same time.

Polyphony describes a musical texture with two or more independent voices moving in different rhythms. It has been part of Western music since the Middle Ages. Renaissance composers developed polyphony to a high level, passing on the tradition to the Baroque, whose compositions used polyphony to add variation and interest to their work.

Counterpoint describes multiple melodic lines interacting used to produce harmonies.

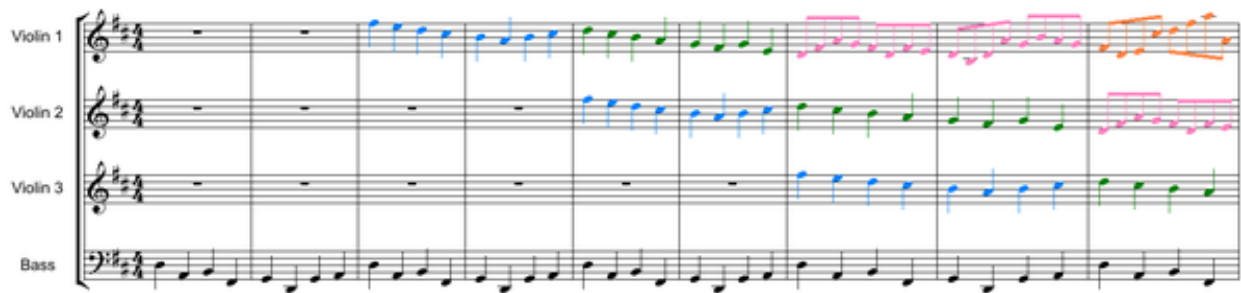
Why was fugue so important in the Baroque? essential paradox of Baroque music: it combined great structure with great emotion.

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One useful distinction in polyphonic writing is that between imitative and non-imitative polyphony. Imitative polyphony describes a texture in which the various lines use the same melody. A round like “Row, row, row your boat” or “Frere Jacques” is an example of strict imitative polyphony: each line sings exactly the same melody with exactly the same words, staggering the entrances to give variety and interest.

A round is a simple kind of canon, so “Row, row, row your boat” is a canon, or to be precise, a canon at the unison, since the second and subsequent voices start on the same note as the first voice.

The famous canon in D-major by the early Baroque German composer Johann Pachelbel is another canon at the unison; note that the melody enters on the same note (F-sharp) every time it appears. Pachelbel’s canon also includes another important device of the Baroque, the ground bass or repeating base line (called passacaglia in Italian and chaconne in French). In this example, the base line repeats every two measures.



Johann Pachelbel, *Canon in D-major*

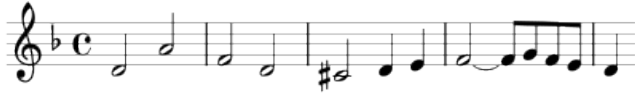
VIDEO: How to listen to classical music, “What is a fugue—a complete introduction”

soprano subject *new material* _____

alto subject *new material* _____

tenor subject *new material* _____

Fugue techniques. Composers have many ways of adding variety in a fugue. Here is one of Bach’s most famous fugue themes, from his last work, The Art of Fugue. Here is the subject, as stated in the first fugue of the set.



Every fugue subject has at least one countersubject heard in counterpoint with it. But composers can also modify the fugue subject itself. Here are several ways:

Contrapunctus I from The Art of Fugue, BWV 1080

- Inversion turns the fugue subject upside down. Where the theme of the original subject went up, the inversion goes down, and vice versa.

Here is how Bach inverted the original fugue subject (he actually did several types of inversion, of which this is the simplest).



Contrapunctus IV from The Art of Fugue

- Augmentation stretches the subject out: a note that lasted one beat now lasts two, a note that lasted two beats now lasts four. Here is one way that Bach augmented the original fugue subject.
- Diminution compresses the subject: a quarter note becomes an eighth note, an eighth note becomes a sixteenth note. In this excerpt, Bach uses diminution for the original theme, heard at the beginning in the top voice, and augmentation for the inverted theme, heard in the bass beginning in measure five. (In speaking of fugues, we use “voice” for any single part, whether sung, or played on an instrument).
- Stretto (Italian, stretto=narrow) indicates that one voice enters with the fugue subject before the previous voice has finished stating it. Stretto adds energy to a fugue, and is most often used near the end to help wrap up the piece.

Good visuals can help understand how a fugue works.

“Little” Fugue for Organ in G minor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bbox4oi6HjA>

Examples of fugues in Bach’s music

Fugue for solo string instrument. It may seem impossible to play a piece with separate parallel melodies on an instrument designed to play only one note at a time. In this fugue, Bach shows us how four separate voices can be delineated by clever placement of the notes, and frequent use of double-stops (playing two strings at one time). Bach later reworked this fugue twice, once for organ, once for lute. Sonata No. 1 for solo violin in G-minor, 2. Fugue—allegro

Fugue as dance. This lively piece is both a gigue (a fast dance in 6/8 time) and a fugue.

Gigue from French Suite No. 5 in G.

Fugue within a ritornello. Here is a fugue embedded in the electrifying last movement of Bach’s second Brandenburg Concerto. The movement is in ritornello form, in which a theme alternates with contrasting material. Thus we have a fugue within a ritornello, two of the most characteristic Baroque instrumental forms.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F, third movement

Double fugue. Here, Bach introduces a subject (The upper voice as written below), works out a complete fugal exposition, then brings back the original subject of Contrapunctus I, making a double fugue. He manages this in only four voices by alternating the first and second subjects in the different voices. Here

is music at the spot where the original subject from Contrapunctus I first appears, together with the new subject (0:34).



Contrapunctus IX from The Art of Fugue.

Choral fugue. These appear often in Bach’s cantatas, passions, and oratorios. In the Mass in B-minor, he incorporates fugues into both Kyrie sections, in three parts of the Credo, and in the Sanctus. Here is the fugue subject, sung first by the tenors, followed by alto II, then soprano I, and finally soprano II combined with alto 1.



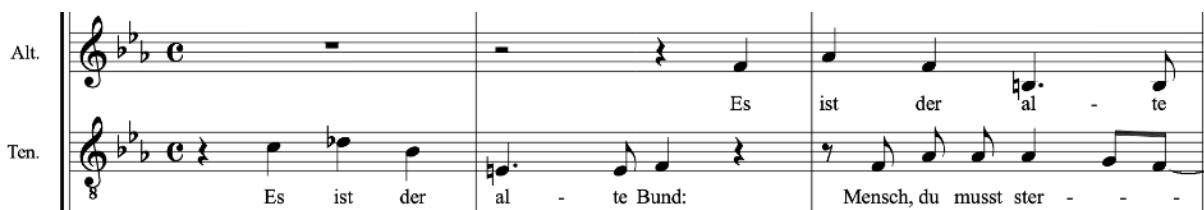
“Pleni sunt coeli,” from Mass in B-minor

Cantata 19, “Es erhub sich ein Streit” (There arose a battle), depicts the mighty struggle of St. Michael with Satan. Forgoing an orchestral introduction, Bach launches immediately into an energetic fugue.



“Es erhub ein Streit,” Cantata 19 movt 1.

Cantata 106, “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit” (God’s time is the best time) includes a mournful fugue on the words, “It is the ancient law: man, you must die.” This is Lutheranism at its most severe and pessimistic, with an unsettled chromatic opening three notes, then a drop of a tritone.



“Es ist der alte Bund” (It is the ancient law), from Cantata 106

Importance of dance in the Baroque

Dance music has been around for a long time. The oldest secular instrument music we have in the West are the Estampie of the High Middle Ages. Renaissance composers used and expanded on dance forms. Baroque composers added the variety of dance forms in the composer's tool kit. Bach used these dance forms to give structure to some of his instrumental music

Why did Baroque composers use dance forms? Dance forms give predictable structures, allowing composers to vary the other elements and offer coherence to the listener.

- Clear obvious beat; steady tempo
- Regular dance types, each with its meter, tempo, and mood, all recognizable to audiences of the time
- Phrase structures are predictable and symmetrical

Suite: a group of instrumental pieces in dance-like forms, though not intended for actual dancing. Composers of the High Baroque used a specific set of dances, mostly from France and Italy. North German composers like Bach used both "suite" and "partita" for groups of dances; they used the French names for the individual dances

In the French Baroque of the 17th century, groups of dances began to appear as concert music. Many of these were not intended for dancing, as they were too elaborate, with too much variation in the rhythm, or at the wrong tempo for actual dancing. Composers in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere soon took up the dance suites, sometimes for full orchestra, sometimes for small ensemble, and sometimes for solo harpsichord, or even violin.

Dance was especially popular in the French Royal Court. Louis XIV himself was trained as a dancer, loved to dance, and often performed onstage as part of the dance ensemble. So it no surprise composers in many countries attached french names to their dance suites.

Allemande - a stately dance in duple meter (2/4 or 4/4 in modern notation)

Courante - a faster dance in 3/4 and 6/8.

Sarabande - a slow dance in triple meter

Gigue - a fast lively dance in 6/8 meter

Composers wrote suites for harpsichord, wind and string instruments, and full orchestra. Bach wrote important suites for solo violin and cello, harpsichord, and full orchestra.

Dance rhythms appear all the time in Bach's vocal music, and modern conductors strive for a dance-y feel to their choral performances.

"Gloria," from Mass in B-minor. Maasaki Suzuki with Bach Collegium Japan. You can't get much more dance-y than this marvelous excerpt from, of all things, a Catholic mass.

Gigue from French Suite No. 5 in G, Andrei Gavrilov, piano

This lively piece is both a gigue (a fast dance in 6/8 time) and a fugue. It demonstrates the central paradox of Baroque music in general, and especially that of J.S. Bach.

Bourée from English Suite No. 2

Gustave Leonhardt, harpsichord

Swingle Singers

Gavotte from French Suite No. 5, Andrei Gavrilov, piano

Corrente from Partita No. 5 in G, Craig Sheppard, piano

Performance practice

Before about 1960, most Bach recordings used large choruses—think of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir—and large orchestras—think of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Tempos could be painfully slow by today’s standards. No one performs Bach like this anymore, but some of these recordings are still worth hearing for the high quality of the playing.

The tide began to turn from this romantic style around 1960 with emergence of historically-informed performance (HIP), also known as period-instrument performance, which attempts to match the instrumental and vocal style of the musical era in which the work was written. We hear HIP most in Renaissance and Baroque music, including the music of Bach.

HIP uses period instruments, usually reproductions of instruments in use at the time of the original composition: a harpsichord instead of a piano, for example, or a wooden keyless Baroque flute instead of the modern silver keyed flute. These older instruments often differ from their modern counterparts in range, timbre, and pitch. HIP also strives to match the tempo, rhythm, articulation, and other technical aspects of the original performance; this is known as performance practice.

Musical selection:

Sonata in G major for violin and continuo BWV 1021, 1. Adagio

- Arthur Grumiaux, violin with Christiane Jaccottet, harpsichord, and Philippe Mermoud, cello
- Adolph Busch, violin with Rudolph Serkin, piano
- Chatham Baroque

Glossary

Baroque	[Portugese <i>barroco</i> = misshapen pearl] In music, the period from 1600 to 1750. In both music and art, baroque style indicates a mixture of drama and emotional expression within a well-defined structure.
BWV	<i>Bach Werk Verzeichnis</i> (Bach Work Catalogue), modern list of Bach’s complete works. His works are known by their titles and BWV numbers.
cadence	End of a musical phrase, indicated by a resolution of melody or harmony.
cantata	An unstaged work for chorus and solo voices. Can be sacred or secular; sacred cantatas are written for church service.
chorale	Hymn tune in the Lutheran church, with roots in Gregorian chant, and adding elements from folk and popular melodies of the day. Bach church cantatas nearly always end with a chorale, intended to be sung by the entire congregation.
concerto	Orchestral form originating in the Baroque, that poses a solo instrument, or a group of solo instruments, against the full ensemble.
counterpoint	The combination of two or more independent vocal lines according to a set of rules.
exposition	The first section in a fugue, in which all voices state the subject clearly (voices refer to the individual lines in a fugue, whether sung or played on instruments).

fugue	Musical form for three, four, or occasionally more voices (musical lines) in which each voice states the theme in turn, followed by elaboration in which the theme returns, often in several voices at the same time.
homophony	Musical texture in which one musical line (“melody”) takes the foreground; the other musical lines move in the same rhythm and appear to accompany the melody; compare with polyphony.
monophony	Musical texture consisting of a single unaccompanied melody, as in plainchant
passion	Cantata on the suffering and death of Jesus, generally written for Holy Week; generally longer and more complex than ordinary cantatas.
polyphony	Musical texture consisting of 2 or more independent melodies moving in different rhythms.
subject	Short theme used as the basis for a fugue. Countersubject is a secondary theme, often sounded against the subject.
toccatà	(from Italian, toccare = to touch) Keyboard piece demanding virtuoso playing, often written to show off the player’s technique.
tonic	Home key of a piece; chord built on the first note of the scale.

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*,
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*,

Good article on historically-informed performance at
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historically_informed_performance