

# CONCERNING THE FUGUE

*By Stefano Greco*

When I first approached the form of the fugue, I was only a child. Of course I could not imagine what lay behind those obscure and hermetic notes which I had to play as a student. What I could feel was something different from the rest of the music I was studying. I must say that I consider myself very lucky, because from the beginning I had more instinct than reason, perhaps more intuition than intelligence, and probably because of those natural gifts I developed a curiosity which pushed me to go further and further towards a conscious understanding. My sensitivity allowed me to feel, from the beginning, a particular pleasure in playing fugues. If I had to describe how it feels, I could say that it is a very sophisticated form of enjoyment, which starts from the most subtle perceptions. For instance, the difference between the pleasure stimulated by a nocturne and the one which is provoked by a fugue is similar to the difference between some very good orange juice and the finest red wine. Children don't usually appreciate tastes which are not immediately sweet. But what I was charmed by was perhaps the mystery of something I could perceive lying behind those notes: a sort of strange and miraculous equilibrium that fascinated and confused me at once. Getting to know more of this hidden equilibrium has been one of my goals for years, and I am still involved in this challenge. As in the most complicated mathematical enigmas, the method I used to form my idea about the fugues and to make the most of my discoveries, was to proceed by small logical steps.

“Counterpoint” is music in which there are two or more independent melodic parts sounding together. This word derives from Latin and Italian. When in the Middle Ages they started to write music, thanks to the development of an early form of notation, the musical notes looked like many small dots on the score. “Dot” in Latin is “punctus” and in Italian “punto”. Writing “counterpoint” would mean putting a note in opposition to another (of another melodic part), i.e. putting “punctus contra punctus” (in Latin), or “punto contro punto” (in Italian). So there is a very logical explanation for the origin of this noun. What about the term “Fugue”? The first appearance of “Fugue” was once again in Latin and Italian, in the form “Fuga”. “Fuga”, in these languages, means “escape”. When we think about the *contrapuntal* music (music in counterpoint) we should try to go back to the time in which the only polyphonic music was sung by monks. So each part of the counterpoint represents a voice of a singer. What the fugue represents is therefore the escape of the Subject (the main theme) from one voice to another. Listening to a fugue is like a mental game that consists of “chasing” the escaping theme between the voices. In fact, composing fugues became for most of the early composers almost a beautiful mental game, which didn't even need to be listened to, in order to give pleasure. Just looking at the written notes could please the expert eyes of the readers. Of course this is because the earlier fugues were exclusively destined for the ears (or the eyes) of very cultured people.

After many centuries of changes and evolution, the fugue got its finest interpreter in Johann Sebastian Bach. Regardless of the personal musical tastes of any musician, everybody agrees in stating that J. S. Bach was the greatest composer of contrapuntal music of all time. What he did was much more than the composing of music, and of course much more than producing mental puzzles. He started from the same basis as the first polyphony singers and commenced an exploration of the forms that led him to the most modern and advanced

harmonies, and he put into his music all the knowledge of his time, in terms of what in the Middle Ages was represented by the Trivium (Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music): these were the seven divisions of the educational curriculum at that time, the Trivium coming first, followed by the more advanced Quadrivium for those students who pursued a continuing education. The way he was able to do so and the way in which his works contain this huge amount of knowledge is the theme of one of my future writings (it would be too complicated and excessively long to write such things in the programme of a recital), but what I want to point out is that in the case of J. S. Bach we are not faced with simple musical creations, but of truly absolute and magical Works of Art and Science. What really astonishes those who approach J. S. Bach's creations is the coexistence of so many elements, each of them apparently independent and accomplished in itself. He used proportions like the Golden Section, the Fibonacci Series, the same numbers that rule the motion of the planets, the same proportions that we can find in the Nature, other numbers related to his name (like the number 14, which is the result, in numerology, of  $B+A+C+H$ ), and then he hid in his works Latin sentences, he referred at the same time to Greek mythology and to Astrology, he represented the concepts of the spiral and infinity in his perpetual canons, etc. Well, I am sure the reader is wondering how terrible a music that realizes the coexistence of all these elements could sound! And here comes the paradox, the miracle: the result is music that sounds so heavenly and unearthly that it makes it impossible to believe it doesn't spring from the purest natural inspiration. I must say that many times I can feel a certain sorrow in this music; but whatever I feel is not related to human emotions: it's a cosmic sadness. I could say that's the same kind of sorrow that one could feel by looking at the infinity of a starry sky. It's as if the entire Universe were sad. By finding myself in front of such miracles, more than once I could not stop my tears for astonishment. It is as if this music came from another world, or as if the only thing in which the work of Bach consisted was transcribing celestial music which has probably been sounding in a remote region of the Universe from the beginning of time.

Probably Bach believed that his music was coming from God, and he surely was perfectly conscious of what he was doing; that's the reason why he wanted to keep it concealed from those who were not enlightened enough, yet provoking the curiosity of the learned by the use of a few enigmatic elements (like the phrase "Quaerendo Invenietis", written in his "Musical Offering", which means, in Latin, "If you search, you'll find", or, in the same work, the acrostic "Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta" = "RICERCAR" - research). What there was to research was the huge amount of knowledge that was kept secret in order to be protected from the *vulgus*.

Johann Sebastian Bach's last work was "The Art of the Fugue", an essay without words on contrapuntal music, the legacy of his art. Composing this work was for him like writing a message, putting it into a bottle and launching it upon the ocean, so that one day somebody else could find it. Bach's way of composing was particular and too "modern", so that after his death the masses almost forgot about him, till in 1829 Mendelssohn revived his "St. Matthew Passion", which caused an enormous popularity to arise for Bach, the Cantor from Eisenach. The only interest that the masses had towards his music was aesthetic, while we know that "aesthetic", according to Bach's intentions, has to be no less than the result of the combination of all the other elements that exist in his music. J. S. Bach, therefore, considered the aesthetic to be a result, and not the goal. This is very important for a correct interpretation of his music.

In the course of musical history, all the major musicians showed interest in J. S. Bach's work and nearly all of them were influenced by him. "The Later Art of the Fugue" is the first fruit of the fellowship between Professor Robert Temple and myself. When we decided to start

this exploration, we could not imagine the huge amount of beautiful and unknown fugues we would find. And most of them were written by the most famous composers! What is the reason why dozens of wonderful compositions have been almost completely neglected? We think that is because of the same reason why the names of so many great composers who certainly deserve attention are not even known by most of the public: it is very sad to say this, but the reason must be because of the trends of fashion. This is one of the worst misfortunes for Art. In fact what decides whether a creation is a work of art or not, is the faculty that people have to understand, and therefore *to buy*. If a composition is too evolved for the taste of the time in which it is composed, it will almost certainly be forgotten, while more ordinary works will be retained in the memory of the listeners. This is why Bach needed to be rediscovered one century after his death, why even nowadays only a few people know the wonderful orchestral music by Giuseppe Martucci, etc. The project – the dream of Professor Robert Temple and myself is to bring back to light what we think has been unfairly forgotten, to give some more justice to Music.

Composing fugues at the time of Chopin was certainly out of fashion; by that time, music editors were already deciding what was worth publishing. They were already facing the pressures of *marketing*, for which it was necessary for Chopin to compose Nocturnes, for Beethoven's Sonata Op. 27 No. 2 to be called "Moonlight", etc. How could the true spirit of an artist come out, when all of his works had to be *sold*? The answer to this question lies in the alternative works, the non-commissioned ones, which in fact all of the major composers wrote.

J. S. Bach was one of the first "modern" composers to write music for himself, without caring so much about whether the public could understand it, nor about the moment of its execution. A real work of art has to be forever. It has to live, independently from its recipients, because it has no recipients other than the spheres from which it came. This is why every time Bach was able to write music only for himself he never indicated instruments. In fact, that was unnecessary! What was important was the accomplishment of the union between humanity and the Absolute, which means Art, Cosmos, and, through proportions, *God*. "Mathematics are the alphabet through which God wrote the Universe", said Galileo Galilei.

Without Mendelssohn and his courageous revival of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion", probably even now we would still be ignoring the most incredible genius of contrapuntal music who has ever lived. This is the proof that – at least in the Arts – being popular and being a true masterpiece are two different concepts, that often these two things do not coincide at all. Many times we might not like something we are listening to, because it sounds "strange" to our ears. In those cases, we have to remember that, in the case in which the music was written by a great composer, very possibly we do not like it because we are not able to understand it completely. Therefore listening to music in a proper way means being very humble and entering into discussion, putting oneself into a dialogue with the music.

Every time I have told my friends about the idea of a recital composed of late fugues, they have asked me: "Of course you also included some Shostakovich?" When I answered there was no time for Shostakovich because we had found more than 2 hours of unknown masterpieces, they were surprised. Of course they could not imagine that Chopin wrote a fugue, and so did Schumann, and even Rachmaninoff! Having too much material made us feel obliged to choose a small part of it for the concert and leave the rest for the future. Now we have the project to record a series of CDs dedicated to The Later Art of the Fugue for the new mini-label Brancusi Classics, which was formed in October, 2005. (See its website: [www.brancusiclassics.com](http://www.brancusiclassics.com))

Even choosing the order of the programme was not easy: the conventional parameters (chronological or stylistic) could not work, because composing contrapuntal music, in a way, put all of the authors on the same level. It was possible, for instance, for a composition by Puccini to be more classical than another one by Schumann or even by Mozart! So what we should imagine, is that we have all the composers of this programme sitting around a table and taking part in the same argument, each of them saying something different, but in the same language. The order of the programme should then be ruled just by the keys of the compositions and by a certain logic which will be clearer once I talk about the single pieces. I have written these extensive notes on the pieces, which appear separately in their traditional place within the recital programme, and I refer you to them for more detailed explanations. In the future I will publish my detailed analyses of Bach to show exactly how he used mathematics and geometry to plan the structure of his fugues, which is an amazing story, and goes far to explain why he was the greatest master of fugues in history. In the meantime, however, we are to enjoy an exploration of what happened to the fugue after the deaths of Bach and Handel, two great contemporaries who were born in the same year and who were both true masters of fugues. On, then, to the 'The Later Art of the Fugue'!

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