

Fugues in general and "The Art of the Fugue", specifically

(Text of a handout for the audience in recitals of "The Art of the Fugue" by Walter Riemer)

The first group of four fugues are called "simple" fugues. They make use of the so-called "Urthema" (original subject), are built in a relatively elementary manner and use contrapuntal feats only to a limited degree.

After four measures ("Dux", here the subject in the alto) in CP1 the "Comes" (in the dominant position, here in the soprano voice) comes in, while the Dux is continued as answer (counterpoint). The two first intervals in the Comes are (compared to the Dux) shortened (as usual), so that the result remains in harmony.

A short interlude follows after four appearances of the subject, preparing for the fugue to be continued a little more freely.

In the first four fugues the subject is always presented in the basic rhythm, in CP1 and CP2 in the basic form ("rectus"), in CP3 and CP4 in the inverted form ("inversus").

From CP2 on, however, Bach starts shifting the subject in time or varying it rhythmically, frequently supplemented with nonchord notes ("Durchgangsnoten"), in CP4 additionally also varied in harmony by occasional changes of interval.

In CP4 Bach for the first time shows a stretta (the subject appearing in two voices at the same time, thus overlapping); the inverted basic subject with itself, and, hard to believe, both appearances shifted by just a quarter note, and that twice in sequence!



The three systems below show an excerpt from CP4 as explained (concerning the stretta) on the left side, last paragraph next to the image.



The Contrapuncti 5 to 7 are counter-fugues ("Gegenfugen"), that is, Rectus and Inversus are used in the same fugue. For Bach, this obviously seems not sufficient to present himself as fugue master: additionally he uses the technique of diminution in CP6, and in the CP7 additionally the augmentation of the subject. In CP7 diminution, basic form and augmentation of the basic subject are used; each of these subject variants naturally has different duration, therefore stretta passages result inherently, considering that the augmentation appears four times within the fugue and takes up much time.

The next group consists of four fugues with more than one subject. In CP8 (triple-fugue) there are three completely new subjects (all, however, related to the basic subject; see table at the end of this paper!); in CP9 a new subject is combined with the basic subject (double fugue). In CP10 another new subject appears, combined with the basic subject as known from CP5 (double fugue). CP11 (triple-fugue) develops the inversed subjects introduced in CP8.

Beyond that, the simple principles, according to which the “comes” is shifted to the dominant (thus a fifth higher), are occasionally replaced by more complicated ones: In CP9 the Twelfth, in CP10 the Tenth takes the place of the dominant.

Although this has the potential of dangerous harmonious complications, Bach handles this without any difficulties; on the contrary, he develops unbelievably delightful harmonies, which are ahead of their time for at least one century.

Two mirror fugues follow, thus actually four fugues connected in pairs. In each pair the second fugues emerges from the first by mirroring at a horizontal axis (see below):

All intervals are inverted: an interval, which goes upwards, now in the mirrored fugue goes downwards and vice versa. Only very rarely half-tone adapting is necessary (the reason being very rare necessities of accidentals, but not resulting from the interval inversion).

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**Contrapunctus 7**  
per Augmentationem et Diminutionem

BWV 1080, 7

**Contrapunctus [12]**  
[rectus]

BWV 1080, 12'

**Contrapunctus 12**  
inversus

BWV 1080, 12'

**Contrapunctus [13]**  
[rectus]

BWV 1080, 13'

**Contrapunctus [13]**  
inversus

BWV 1080, 13'

Now it is high time to leave fugues alone. The canon also is a contrapuntal form that in certain respects follows even more strict rules than the fugue, since in the individual voices no liberty at all is given as far as deviations from each other are concerned.

The "Canones" therefore have "only" two voices. This, however, would obviously be too simple for Bach, so he starts the second voice, which is a copy of the first, in the pitch of the first only in the first canon (octave canon); in the second (decima canon) a tenth (third) higher, in the third (duodecima canon) a twelfth (fifth) higher, and in the last canon (augmentation canon) not shifted in pitch, but augmented and inverted.

Canon [in Hypodiatessaron]  
per Augmentationem in Contrario Motu

BWV 1080, 14

The final climax is the unfinished final fugue (CP14), a fugue with four subjects (quadruple fugue), whose last subject was intended to be the basic subject ("Urthema") itself. Unfortunately this last section is missing, the manuscript ending in a single voice, the others already missing.

[Contrapunctus 14]"

BWV 1080, 1"

The publishers of the first edition (Bach's sons) added a Choral in G major. It is neither really intended for nor a part of "The Art of the Fugue"; nevertheless it closes the work in a quite suitable and very moving manner and therefore is very often included in performances.

Finally to the right an overview of the basic subject in nine variants.