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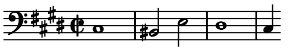
ESSAYS

ON BWV849/2

JOSEPH KERMAN



Among the special features of *Bachanalia: The Essential Listener's Guide to Bach's* Well-Tempered Clavier – a well-meaning effort, though badly misconceived, in my view – are author Eric Lewin Altschuler's picks for 'The Top Ten Fugues', 'The Top Ten Subjects', 'The Superstar Four' and so on.[1]

Well, among 'The Four Most Pithy Subjects' (Book 1, C sharp minor and A flat major; Book 2, C sharp major and E major), C sharp minor ranks as the superstar – the shortest, the most constrained and the most obsessive. The subject consists of only five notes, drawn from four consecutive pitches, and it holds to the tonic intently, setting down on C♯ twice and leaning on it by means of the slow cadential progression 2̂–1̂ (D♯–C♯). The fugue admits only two form-defining cadences, at bars 35 and 59 (half-way through), and following the latter the subject marches up to hammer away at C♯ as many as eight times. More than a fair share of these entries are placed as prominently as possible, in the soprano or the bass. Although two spectacular tonal shifts interrupt this tonic parade, the subject returns in the tonic after each of them with renewed force.

As a trajectory for a fugue this certainly seems remarkable, though it has not excited much comment in the literature – as remarkable for the quality of rootedness itself as for the apparent relation between the subject of this fugue and its form. Organic theories of music, which grew up along with the Bach revival of the nineteenth century and took sustenance from it, lingered long into the twentieth and probably still linger. Might not the basic matter of a fugue project itself, as though organically, into the form of the whole? The Fugue in C sharp minor would appear to say so. The tonic obsession of its first four bars is 'composed out' over its last fifty. Of the secondary pitches, D♯ will accommodate a subject entry and E a stretto.

On another level, the subject's aggressively dissonant interval of a diminished fourth (B♯–E) stimulates expressive minor-mode harmonies throughout, sonorities enriched to the point of luxuriance in the passages that employ all of the five voice parts.

Bars 1–35 Section 1 of the Fugue in C sharp minor treats the principal subject alone, and section 2 combines it with two faster subjects or countersubjects. Starting in the bass, the initial exposition proceeds inexorably through successively higher and higher voices, and once the texture is filled out, new entries surge up in a second exposition, maintaining or even amplifying the grandeur of the first.

The first few entries sustain a traditional-sounding countersubject and set up a three-bar hypermetre, of some importance later in the piece. But almost at once the process of exposition starts to waver or transmute. The three-bar metre dissipates, as does the countersubject, while the shrinking of the subject's opening

1 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 67; see also 246–248.

semibreve into a minim eases the flow and at the same time softens its character very considerably. Small irregularities in the protocol (a relaxed stretto (bar 14), entries in the subdominant (12, 22)) break down the steady order – the logic, as one usually says – of fugal exposition.

One can imagine Bach feeling this music out at the keyboard, improvising. He seems less interested in building from the subject at this point than in mulling over another figure, a scale figure in crotchets salvaged from the aborted countersubject. 'Nothing more is heard of this [countersubject]', says Tovey, 'except a figure of descending crotchets which, developed by inversion in bars 17–18, fills up most of the texture ... after which it gives rise to the second subject.'[2] The mood is less cumulative than ruminative.

What Tovey is describing is a variety of Schoenberg's 'developing variation'; developing variation is superimposed on fugal exposition here, and could really be said to supplant it when major-mode entries defang the dissonant, lowering diminished fourth that lies at the heart of the subject (bars 29–35).[3] (To fill out Tovey's very succinct account: after the crotchet scale figure is initially developed by means of imitation (bars 9–11, 13–16), it grows into longer and longer lines, first one that curls up through a sixth, then one that slips down though an eleventh. The developmental tools in bars 17–18 are sequence and inversion, in bars 25–27 diminution. From bar 17 on, the figure generally appears in an expanded form, encompassing a fourth rather than third. Finally – a tiny point, but God is in the details – the scale figure accumulates an anterior note on a downbeat (bar 30), touching off the longest line of all, a broken scale in several voices over more than two octaves, opening up into the sonorous cadence (bars 30–35)).

How exquisitely the scale figure 'gives rise to the second subject', by rising still further, in a new diminution (bar 36). But from now on the fugue becomes less ruminative than relentless.

Bars 35–59 The cadence arrives at the mediant, E – already forecast at the end of the first exposition – and is undercut; still another exposition in the tonic begins by superimposing C sharp minor upon E major. This standard Baroque ploy becomes functional in this composition, for the next cadence, in the submediant, is undercut in the same way.

In this new exposition the original subject comes with another fluid second subject above it in the soprano, and during the answer this continues its steady descent undisturbed, rather than migrating to another voice like a regular countersubject. The point was evidently to generate a long descending line in the treble, for a similar one occurs in bars 82–88. Sinking movement predominates in the later stages of this composition; the partly chromatic descent in bars 67–73 and 99–105 stays in the ear as one of its most impressive affective gestures.

Material is doled out gradually, the second subject entering in bar 35, the vigorous third subject in bar 49,[4] and a kick-off figure (also vigorous) added to the second subject in bar 51. Again, the new exposition starts at three-bar intervals. It tilts heavily toward the subdominant but proceeds via another major-mode entry (with a rather startling stretto) to a cadence in the submediant.

2 Donald Francis Tovey, ed., *Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues by J. S. Bach* (London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1924), Preface; reprinted in large part as 'Commentary', in *J. S. Bach: The Well-Tempered Clavier*, ed. Richard Jones (London: Associated Board, 1995), volume 1, 142.

3 David Ledbetter remarks, in his fine new book *Bach's* Well-Tempered Clavier *The 48 Preludes and Fugues* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), that the C sharp minor fugue takes the 'principle of constant growth and development' which he traces back to Frescobaldi 'to a level and intensity not previously achieved, and which links the counterpoint of the late Renaissance to the techniques of development of the later 18th and 19th centuries' (162).

4 Another exquisite derivation is pointed out by Cecil Gray: the quaver turn figure in the third subject (perhaps recollected from the aborted original countersubject) has already appeared in bar 40 to lay to rest the crotchet scale figure of section 1. Cecil Gray, *The Forty-Eight Preludes and Fugues of J. S. Bach* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 26. Even Czaczkes missed this, as best I can tell (Ludwig Czaczkes, *Analyse des* Wohltemperierten Klaviers: *Form und Aufbau der Fuge bei Bach* (Vienna: Kaltschmid, 1956).

Bars 59–94 But now say goodbye to the major mode. Few if any traces of it can be found in the fifty-odd bars that remain to the piece, up to the hungrily awaited, gratifyingly drawn-out *tierce de Picardie*.

The cadence in A major balances the previous E major cadence; this key, too, is undercut, and the sense of starting over again in the tonic is plainer now both because the subject stands out in the soprano and because it finally reinstates its long-lost opening semibreve. It hangs on to this weighty – indeed, as it now sounds, momentous – lead-off for the rest of the piece, in eight granitic subject entries. It reverts to minims only as an extra contribution to excitement during the stretto of bars 94–98. (One other reversion comes in a much-discussed subdominant entry – heard clearly enough, though divided between two voices – at bars 85–88. The fugue's unusual bias toward the subdominant, site of five subject entries as against three in the dominant, would have been calculated to balance the upcoming excursion to the 'double dominant'.)

After the cadence in bar 59, the start-up in the tonic does not lead to modulation along well worn paths, to mediants and submediants, as happened after bar 35. We are brought to new and radical keys by shock tactics. Almost directly after asserting the subject in C sharp minor, the soprano comes back to repeat it, intensified, a major second higher, in D sharp minor. (The minor supertonic is of course a remote or extreme key in Bach's system, seldom figuring as the site for a fugal entry, and when it does, the entry is approached via a close key, not juxtaposed with the tonic, as happens here.) As though in response to this anomaly, the supertonic entry recoils in a down-surge of chromaticism. Implicit in the subject from the start, chromaticism becomes explicit at the moment of harmonic extremity.

Redress occurs in the form of a mighty rumble on the tonic at the very bottom of Bach's keyboard (bars 73–76). (The low B♯ at this place must have been the reason he chose C sharp minor for this subject. This entry is the first entry in the bass since back in section 1.) Or perhaps Bach acted as *agent provocateur*, promoting the tonal shock in order to rationalize his tonic obsession. For remarkably, and certainly obsessively, on the heels of the low bass entry two others follow on the tonic, with all three subjects circulating through the five voices in triple counterpoint. A fourth (!) tonic entry seems desperate to break out of a rut – bars 92–93 feel like a heroic bid for freedom.

They are rewarded by another tonal shock, by a multiple stretto that starts by superimposing E minor upon C sharp minor. This jolts as violently, and as anomalously, as the earlier one from C sharp to D sharp minor.

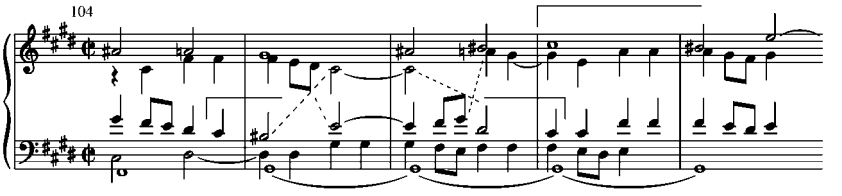
Bars 94–115 If thematic material (or the lack of it) is considered the main marker of musical form, the remainder of the piece would have to count as a third discrete section, for the second subject stops dead at this point and never comes back. Hermann Keller imagined a 'a bitter battle' between the two other subjects, 'in which the first countersubject by its nature is not equipped to take part'.[5] Of course it had to stop if the stretto was to make its effect, and if the piece was to end in five-part polyphony.

But if this is a three-part structure, it is a highly eccentric one. The music rushes headlong from section 2 into the putative section 3. Bar 94 lacks both the strong stop and the tonal shift of bar 35 (and bar 59), and I can only hear the activity that flares up there as an intense, concentrated digression from the parade of tonic subject entries starting at bar 73. Tonal movement up the circle of fifths – just the right harmonic process to heighten excitement, like the reversion from the opening semibreve to a minim, as noted above – hastily restores the tonic.

Stretto became a major issue in the academic fugue that was developed in the conservatories of the nineteenth century and probably still haunts pedagogy today. The densest of strettos was supposed to be saved till the end of the composition, where it would provide a weighty climax. The Fugue in C sharp minor seems to provide an example: four appearances of the first subject are pressed into a space of six bars at a point not far from the end, and there are even more stretto appearances of the third subject. The latter experiences an efflorescence from now on, though the first subject, as expanded by Bach, holds its own also.

5 Hermann Keller, *The Well-Tempered Clavier by Johann Sebastian Bach*, trans. Leigh Gerdine (New York: Norton, 1976), 63.

In another respect, however, the stretto here provides no model for the *stretto maestrale.* This is not a climax of weight (such as does occur in a closer model for that device in *The Well-Tempered Clavier,* Book 1, the Fugue in B flat minor). In the C sharp minor one could speak of a climax of agitation, but the climax of weight comes later. The stretto is more like a momentary paroxysm in which the first and third subjects fight furiously, according to Keller, until oil is poured on the waters by seventeen gorgeous, slow-flowing bars of minor-mode polyphony which bring the fugue to rest. This is by far the fugue's longest passage in the full five-part texture. (Note the three-bar hypermetre again, defined by the start of the stretto and the tonic entries at bars 97 and 100. The latter is another entry divided between two voices. One can also construe a ninth tonic entry starting three bars later; see Example 1.)



Example 1

It is hard to get too upset with anyone passionate enough about *The Well-Tempered Clavier* to write a whole book about it. One winces, though, to find the Fugue in C sharp minor not in *Bachanalia*'s Top Ten, or even Top Forty Fugues, but in the limbo of Altschuler's 'Long, Slow, and Not My Favorite' Club.

For this music has been greatly, even extravagantly, admired. Mozart arranged it (in D minor) for string quintet, with a lovely new prelude, and it haunted Beethoven when he wrote his Quartet in C sharp minor, Opus 131 (another work with a subdominant bias). For Spitta, it was a composition

> of such vast breath and sublimity, of such stupendous – even overwhelming – harmonic power, that Bach himself has created but few to equal it. It is as though we were drifting rapidly over a wide ocean; wave rises over wave created with foam, as far as the eye can reach, and the brooding heavens bend solemnly over the mighty scene – the surging forces of nature and helpless, devoted humanity.[6]

The prelude, too, has been equally and rightly admired. David Schulenberg surely speaks for the consensus when he calls the Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor 'one of the great masterpieces of *WTC* I.'[7]

The work might almost have been calculated to impress the nineteenth century, when short, terse motives were the order of the day. The exceptionally short subject rather resembles the 'Muss es sein?' motif in another Beethoven string quartet, Op. 135, and even the 'Fate' motif in *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Riemann described it darkly as 'absorbed in itself, moving round itself, decidedly turned away from the world – brooding – Beethovenish'.[8] Grim enough by itself – the diminished fourth is astonishingly potent – the subject builds up a kind of Byronic intensity through its obsessive same-key repetitions. What classically-minded critics might frown upon as redundant impressed the Romantics as relentless, fate-driven; one thinks of the 'Dies irae' in Liszt's *Totentanz,* for instance (actually, Bach has drawn on another time-worn melody, that of the Advent chorale 'Nun komm der Heiden Heiland').

6 Philip Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach* [1873–1880], trans. Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (New York: Dover, 1951), volume 2, 169.

7 David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* (New York: Schirmer, 1992), 172.

8 Hugo Riemann, *Analysis of J. S. Bach's* Wohltemperiertes Clavier *(48 Preludes and Fugues),* trans. J. S. Shedlock (London: Augener, 1890), volume 2, 88.

When this music is not haunted and driven it is violently disrupted, at bars 66 and 94. One does not associate dramatic gestures of this kind with Bach as a writer of fugues. They resonate well with the romantic spirit.

What resonated best of all, perhaps, was the combination of factors, mentioned above, which can be heard as teleological, as though driving purposefully toward a goal. The developing variation in section 1 is a pre-eminently teleological technique. Then new thematic material is introduced step by step – the fluid second subject, the vigorous third, and more. In the famous combative stretto and its sequel, the latest comer bids fair to outdo the main subject, seizing the initiative as the race approaches its goal. The *tierce de Picardie* at the end magnificently *is* that goal.

All this – and all subsumed under the ideal aegis of organic form. The Fugue in C sharp minor swept Spitta over stormy oceans. It conducted Busoni through a great cathedral:

> In this fugue we seem to be borne upward, out of the crypt of a mighty cathedral, through the broad nave and onward to the extreme height of the vaulted dome. Midway in our flight, the unadorned gloom of the beginning is supplanted by bright ornamentation; mounting to the close, the structure grows in austere sublimity; yet the presence of the unifying idea is felt everywhere – the single fundamental motif leaves its impress on every part.[9]

9 Ferruccio Busoni, ed., *The Well-Tempered Clavichord by Johann Sebastian Bach, Revised, Annotated, and Provided with Parallel Examples and Suggestions for the Study of Modern Pianoforte-Technique* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1895).