

# BACH BROADCASTS

## The Art of Fugue from 2YC

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J. S. BACH'S "Art of Fugue," transcribed for string quartet, is to be presented by Station 2YC in three parts, beginning at 9.01 p.m. on Saturday, June 8, and continuing at the same time the following two Saturdays. The version to be broadcast was transcribed by Roy Harris and M. D. H. Norton, and is played by the Roth String Quartet. The final quadruple fugue was left unfinished by Bach, and the Roth recording stops at the point where the manuscript ends. For another recording, the late Sir Donald Tovey wrote "A Listener's Guide to the Art of Fugue," which was reprinted in one volume of his "Essays in Musical Analysis," and we have taken the following extracts from it:

BACH'S Art of Fugue is a series of fugues demonstrating all the principal types and devices of fugue, from the simplest to the most complex. All the fugues have the same theme,



This is the theme upon which the whole work is built

though some begin with other themes which afterwards combine with it. In order to display the texture of the work, Bach wrote it in open score,\* showing thereby that it is written, like most of his fugues, for a definite number of voices which do not become confused. This conceals the almost equally important fact that, with two exceptions, these fugues are keyboard music as strictly practical as those in *The Well-tempered Clavier*. Some modern editors have denied this, but it is not a matter of opinion at all; he who denies it merely shows that he has never been taught to play from score, an art which ought to be, as it was in Bach's time, one of the elementary items in a musical education. No passage in *The Art of Fugue* is quite as difficult as the E Flat Prelude in the first book of *The Well-tempered Clavier*.

The set of gramophone records to accompany which this essay was written presents *The Art of Fugue* through the medium of a string quartet, and thus enables the listener to hear the part-writing in perfect clarity. Such an opportunity is rare, and Mozart, whose own part-playing on the pianoforte left nothing to be desired, actually took the trouble to write out several four-part fugues of *The Well-tempered Clavier* for string quartet in order to enjoy the effect.

### One at a Time

Much enjoyment of music has been spoiled by false teaching about the nature of part-writing. Psychologists tell us that it is impossible to attend to more than two things at once. From this it

must follow that we cannot attend to all the four parts of these fugues at once, and that it must be still more impossible to attend to all the details of augmentation, diminution, stretto, inversion, double, triple, and quadruple counterpoint through which Bach develops his subject and counter-subjects. But it ought never to be supposed that any such attention is required of the listener. Nothing prevents the listener from hearing all these things at once and attending to one thing at a time.

The object of the present commentary is to direct the listener's attention to what is immediately enjoyable, whether on a first hearing or on intimate acquaintance. On a first hearing every listener can enjoy the physical beauty of pure part-writing played in perfect tune by a string quartet. This does not long remain an object of attention; it soon passes into a state of musical comfort which we do not wish to have disturbed. So long as that comfort lasts we

are at leisure to attend to details, though the details will hardly force themselves on us unless some disturbance of the comfort arouses our attention.

### Bold, but Smooth

The masterly use of roughness is, of course, one of the most important elements in art. In music the word "discord" has from quite early classical times been as harmless a grammatical term as a "transitive verb" or the "accusative case." The harmonic style of *The Art of Fugue* is often very bold. But at its boldest it is very smooth, notably smoother than that of many earlier works of Bach, and it is nowhere more smooth than where the combinations are most complex and most difficult for the composer to construct. Hence the listener must not expect that his attention will be roused by the ingenuity of this music at all.

In *The Art of Fugue* Bach always preserves the whole subject, from first note to last. Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish between genuine entries and fragmentary allusions, such as often constitute the bulk of more loosely constructed fugues, like many of Handel's, where the subject is soon boiled to rags. Yet even in *The Art of Fugue* the listener will find that, at all events after the first four fugues, it is as well to abandon the effort to count the entries of the subject. You obviously cannot tell whether the subject is complete until it has been completed: and in the higher orders of fugue the subject is only one of many elements that demand the attention, though it is the only thing that many pianoforte players have ever been taught to respect.

\*With each part on a separate staff.