

Fugue No. 19

A Major

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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To read this essay in its hypermedia format, go to the Shockwave movie at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~tas3/wtc/i19.html>.



Subject: Fugue No. 19, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

volant - Passing rapidly through the air or space, as if by flight; floating lightly in the air; active, nimble.

Oxford English Dictionary

This fugue showcases David Korevaar's volant touch on the piano. He is a worthy successor to generations of virtuoso pianists like Robert Schumann who considered the *Well-Tempered Clavier* to be "the work of all works." Mozart always had a copy open at his piano. Beethoven especially loved this fugue the first note of which, according to Czerny, he would play *fortissimo staccato* followed by a *piano legato*.

The two subjects of this work qualify it as the only double fugue (of the "fugues") in Book I. (Curiously, the prelude of the E-flat major pair is actually a double fugue!) The 1st subject arrests attention with its head motive of one pitch and tail of patterned skips--up a fourth, down a third. By contrast, the volant 2nd subject is made of steps. The distinction between double fugue and the more common fugue with countersubjects is that the 2nd subject is not heard in the 1st exposition.

Procedurally the fugue is laid out as follows: 1st exposition (1st subject alone), 1st development and bridge passage, double exposition (both subjects), 2nd development (both subjects) 3rd development (1st subject alone) and Coda (both

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subjects). I especially admire the marvelously arched phrases whereby David Korevaar has shaped sections bounded by cadences in related keys.

The colored portions of the timeline represent only the coherent statements of subject. But these do not adequately reveal the clustered imitations that saturate this fugue. To represent these imitations, I have activated their colors corresponding to the measures in which they are heard.

The exposition with its 1st and 3rd developments is particularly hypnotic. Observe how the pattern of interlocking skips is low-high-low alternating with high-low-high. These are combined with sometimes synchronized directions and other times not. The technical word for this is *imbrication*. Like overlapping bricks of a building, or pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, they sound like dense stretto. This is especially "puzzling" inasmuch as the fugue, except for its second measure, is technically without stretto.

The 2nd subject is also richly imitated. Sections devoted to it include the double exposition with its subsequent development, and the Coda. While the counterpoint does not literally preserve the contour, driving motor rhythm alone is sufficient to identify these measures as offspring.

The concept of fugue is rich in its possibilities for intertextual comparisons. This fugue provides a fitting occasion to explore two of its classic contexts. Consider for example the implications of fugue from literary subject to music in Dante, and its return to literature in Milton.

The word *fugue* appears first in literature--the Italian word *fuga* meaning "flight." The following stanza from the Divine Comedy illustrates.

*Rotti fuor quivi e vòlti ne li amari
passi di fuga; e veggendo la caccia,
letizia presi a tutte altre dispari,
Dante Alighieri
Purgatorio, Canto 13:118-119*

There they were routed, beaten; they were reeling
along the bitter paths of flight; and seeing
that chase, I felt incomparable joy,
tr. Mendelbaum

These words were written in the 13th century, well before the musical fugue had evolved. In polished *terza rima* Dante prepared that evolution, especially in his linking of *fuga* to *caccia*--a chase. Here Dante seems to have predicted the fugue's canonic precursor, where one voice literally chases another. Four centuries later Bach wrote this fugue, two thirds of which consists of the 1st subject chasing itself (*caccia*) like a puppy pursuing its tail. In turn the gazelle-like 2nd subject takes flight (*fuga*) with incomparable joy.

If Dante's *fuga* and *caccia* help us to understand music, Milton closes the circle by using the fugue to illumine Paradise (lost). In Book XI the Archangel leads Adam to the top of a hill and reveals, in a series of scenes, what the consequences of his disobedience will be. In one scene:

He lookd and saw a spacious Plaine, whereon
Were Tents of various hue; by some were herds
Of Cattel grazing: others, whence the sound
Of Instruments that made melodious chime
Was heard, of Harp and Organ; and who moovd
Thir stops and chords was seen: his volant touch
Instinct through all proportions low and high
Fled and pursu'd transverse the resonant fugue.

John Milton - *Paradise Lost* Book XI

Milton wrote these words half a century before the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Even then his audience would have been familiar with the sound of a fugue; many would have heard the fugues of Milton's contemporary, Henry Purcell. They would have understood that Milton was using fugue metaphorically. He intended to reference what they knew about music in order to reveal something else. But what?

Let us begin with the phrase "fled and pursued." This is the very concept of the chase that we read in Dante and hear in this fugue. Now consider the word *transverse*. In a fugue this references the linear, what we sometimes call the "horizontal," construction of the subject and counterpoint. The fugue's voices pursue each other in a transverse position.

The richness of Milton is that he admits various interpretations. Some have applied this stanza to divine providence. God is like the composer, controlling every polyphonic voice, giving each a degree of independence (free will) but also bringing it into harmony with the others and Himself. In this view the "resonant fugue" is *with us*, even as Milton's poem assures Adam and Eve that God is with them in their exile from Eden.

God is, as here, and will be found alike
Present, and of his presence many a sign
Still following thee, still compassing thee round
With goodness and paternal love, his face
Express, and of his steps the track divine.

But this interpretation barely scratches the surface. While it justifies *the ways of God to men* (Book I, line 26), it does not acknowledge the immediate context for Milton's use of "resonant fugue" in Book XI. The second half of that book is devoted to warning Adam about the folly of intemperance.

Temperance, then, is foundational to our understanding of Milton's metaphor. Let us set the stage. Adam asks how he will endure the weight of exile and is



Detail from John Martin's
1827 illustration of
Paradise Lost, Book XI,
by permission of the
Harry Ransom Center.

told that he will bear it by the rule of *not too much*, a reference to moderation. The Archangel then cautions Adam against overindulging appetites of various kinds.

The scene where Milton wrote of the "resonant fugue" alludes to the distraction of what he shortly calls a "lustful appetite." In this interpretation fled and pursu'd, as well as the volant touch, are metaphorical of they who "light the nuptial torch." As for pursuing *transverse*, it seems obvious that Milton has used the fugue as a flirtatious metaphor, if not the act of making love.

We who live in a libertine society may find it difficult to appreciate Milton's appeal to *fugue*, the most temperate of forms, as a symbol for carnal love. To be sure, the word implies a chase, which allows the possibility of impulse. But the fugue's stronger connotation is one of moderation and design. While the fugue is sometimes exuberant (this one certainly is), its joy is a consequence of its temperance. The fugue is not impulsive, but purposeful, and restrained in the consummation of its purpose. It acknowledges preconceived plans and follows rules. So Milton's "resonant fugue" is anything but Bohemian.

What is gained by comparing Bach with Dante and Milton? For one, all three conceived of fugue in similar ways: a chase, imitative, a flight. With all three, fugue has something to do with being human and our place on earth. But we also see differences. Whereas Dante the Catholic begins the *Divine Comedy* in Hell and ends it in Paradise, Milton the Puritan begins his narrative in Heaven and ends it in Hell. In Dante's *fuga* it is man who chases God, with Milton it is God who chases man (by chastising men who chase women).

With Bach, the fugue is timeless and beautiful for its balance between harmony (vertical, pointing heavenward), and melody (transverse, pointing to the horizons). In this sense Bach has synthesized the best of Dante and Milton. He is the consummate contrapuntist; his art is universal--Catholic and Protestant.

In the final analysis we have learned more about Milton the puritan than of Bach the composer. To infer that Milton has used the fugue to espouse a puritan sexual ethic is plausible. To be fair, it is a puritan, not puritanical, ethic. If Milton is guilty of anything here, it is only that he has employed artful language, which should not be confused with prurience. This is one reason why *Paradise Lost* is the greatest epic poem in the English Language.

That a fugue represents, in Milton's words, "instinct through all proportions low and high" is lofty praise for any work of art (*instinct* here meaning innately imbued with or inspired by). Some may ask, "Well and good that proportionality befits the fugue, but why apply its lessons to the bed?" To this objection we might hear the consummate contrapuntist (and father of twenty) reply: *Warum nicht?* "Why not?"