

Fugue No. 23

B 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://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/i23.html>.



Subject: Fugue No. 23, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

The Germans gave us Johann Sebastian Bach, but the French gave us Claude Monet. And this fugue, one of my personal favorites, gives me the opportunity to liken the fugue to a beautiful painting. While many works of art are fugue-like in their composition, I shall use details from Monet's series paintings of poplars along the country roads and waterways of Normandie, France.

Monet and Bach represent different epochs in the history of art and music: Bach from the high Baroque and Monet from the movement known as impressionism, more than a hundred years later. Nevertheless their art is alike in many ways. It is upon the techniques of composition that surface in nearly every epoch that I shall focus.

Monet was entranced by the effect of light and shade. He observed that a landscape acquired new aspects at different times of the day, or in different weather or seasons. He sought to capture, in his own words: "The passing cloud, the cooling breeze, the sudden storm that threatens to burst and finally does, the wind that stirs and suddenly blows with full force, the light that fades and is reborn."

Monet's love of light led him to do something not altogether unknown among artists, but which he did with more élan. He painted the same subjects repeatedly, some as many as forty or more times. Monet realized that a row of

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trees in the full summer sun made a different impression than the same row in the haze of a winter morning. His series paintings began in the Creuse Valley in central France and continued with grainstacks, poppies, poplars, mornings on the Seine, the cathedral at Rouen, ice floes, a spring meadow, Mount Kolsaas, cliffs, and the Japanese bridge in his water garden.

By now you have surely guessed where this comparison is taking us. If the principle of fugue could be redacted to a single idea, it would be that the subject is heard, in series, with variation. In one of Monet's most extensive series, the "subject" was the poplar. Each painting represents a row of these stately trees, each one being somewhat different. The most impressive variation is found in the subtle atmospheres that Monet captured each time he set up his easel.

Bach employs several techniques to vary this subject (do ti do re). The first is tonal variation; the subject's answer keeps to the same key but employs different scale steps (sol mi fa sol). Another technique involves transposition. In m. 16, for example, the subject is stated in F-sharp major, the key of the dominant.

The second development (m. 18) features one of the more exotic techniques for variation. Here Bach has composed two statements of the subject in its mirror image. The slate-colored entries on the timeline represent instances where the subject's interval directions have been reversed. Here the subject is literally heard upside-down. Monet also used the technique of inversion. This can be seen in the reflection of a poplar's image upon the River Epte in his hometown of Giverny.

Another way to present the subject involves a change of mode. In this fugue, every statement save one is in the major mode. The exception is heard in m. 24 where the subject has been mutated to minor. A change of mode could be likened to the brilliant yellows that Monet painted as his "poplars in summer" progressed to autumn.

One of Bach's favorite techniques for variation is invertible counterpoint, where two motives exchange registers. Listen to mm. 3-4. The subject (periwinkle) is in the high voice and the countersubject (yellow) is in the low. Study the orientation of these colors on the timeline and you will see that, except for mm. 7-8, the subject is always above its counter. Measures 7-8 represent the *contrapuntal inversion* (another way of saying *double counterpoint*) of the others.

Double counterpoint involves two motives exchanging registers, but a single motive can also move to new registers. We hear this in the subject and countersubject migrating from voice to voice without having exchanged places relative to each other. For example, the last two statements are in the same key as the first two, but they are heard in the alto and soprano instead of tenor and alto. In each of these instances the subject is still above its counter: double counterpoint is therefore not involved.

Notice that two of the B-Major subjects (m. 11 and m. 21) are not accompanied by the countersubject at all. This latter statement (m. 21) is significant in another way. It represents the second (and final) time the subject is heard in the bass voice. The first was in m. 7. Can you hear how these two statements have been varied? If your answer is "tonal variation" then you would be correct; m. 7 begins with sol mi fa sol and m. 21 with do ti do re.

This comparison has focused mainly upon the similarity of a Monet poplar to a fugue's subject. It has focused secondarily upon techniques that Monet and Bach have both used to provide for variation of the subject. Monet's technique was to capture the effects of light and shadow. Bach's technique was to use tonal and modal variation as well as transposition, double counterpoint, and changes in register.

Monet chose his subjects carefully. He lived in a time of social turmoil, near anarchy. His series paintings on the Rouen Cathedral paid tribute to the religious tradition of France, while his grainstacks referenced the stability of an agrarian economy. The poplar was, for the French, a symbol of freedom.

In addition to demonstrating masterful technique, Monet's series paintings pointed to a way out of contemporary political uncertainties. They were not just about capturing impressions of the moment, they emanated from his belief in nature and rural community values over those of the city, political elites, and industrial mercantilism.

Bach's fugues also emanated from a strong belief. He believed that the musical motive could capture what the Germans called *Affekt*. This was the embodiment of a feeling, or a mood, or an emotion. In this sense Bach's art is quite like Monet's.

Not only did Bach believe in *Affect*, he also believed that it was music's purpose to point the way toward something. As we have noted elsewhere, he believed that the ultimate aim of all music should be to glorify God. He was, like Monet, a preacher at heart. With both men it was a gentle and artful sermon: one filled with light and color, the other with tones, keys, and motives.