

Fugue No. 2

C minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book II

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 2, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

fugue /fju:g/ noun & verb
[Latin *fuga* flight, rel. to *fugere* flee.]
Oxford English Dictionary

It is a lucky accident of the English language that *flight* can mean not just to flee but also to soar through the air. So I say that a fugue is like a flight of geese. As I write, thousands of these lovely birds pass daily aloft on their annual migration. I am entranced by their graceful flight and sinuous V-shaped patterns.

Geese remind me of this particular fugue for three reasons. The gentle music is an obvious comparison. But their continually fluctuating formations also remind us that fugue was historically rooted in the practice of improvisation. This fugue, above others in the 48, sounds most improvised.

Like the young geese who learn migration routes from their parents, Bach learned this subject from generations before him. Variations of it had flown their way into fugues by Kerll and Frescobaldi, composers whose music a ten-year-old Johann Sebastian had surreptitiously copied by moonlight in his elder brother's library. It was what we call a *generic* subject, in the public domain, upon which any composer was invited to improvise.

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But I chose this fugue for a third reason. Its subject is itself in the shape of a V. The resemblance can be heard in the answer (high voice of m. 2). The contours of its head and tail are retrogrades:

Head: lower neighbor, down-skip

Tail: up-skip, new lower neighbor

I've represented the V-shaped structure of the subject by flipping halves on the timeline, like turning pages in a book. In the 2nd development the subject also undergoes augmentation. The subject is melodically inverted twice in the 2nd development and again in the 3rd.

With each flap of its wings a goose creates updrafts on either side and behind. Upon these windy waves others soar and form their majestic V's. By surfing on another's wake a bird can fly three times as far as the goose that goes it alone. So a flight of geese is very much more than the sum of its parts.

A fugue's polyphony is like that. One voice repeatedly stating the subject would tire after but a few bars. The fugue's longevity depends upon the synergy of its voices. So a fugue *too* is greater than the sum of its parts.

The leader of a migrating formation is put upon to expend the greatest energy. This effort cannot be sustained forever. It is said that geese honk to encourage their leaders to fly as hard and fast, for as long, as they can. When one tires, another will take its place. Individuals momentarily falling out of place will quickly feel the drag and catch up.

The most obvious comparison to a flight of geese is in how a fugue's subject is passed from voice to voice. A voice stating the subject is like the point bird in a V-formation. In mm. 19-22 the bass voice leads for three consecutive statements: first augmented, then inverted, then straight. This represents an unusually robust leader, even for a fugue.

When a goose is injured or sick, two geese will leave the formation to protect and keep her company. They will stay with the injured goose until she recovers or dies, then they will join another flight or form a new one.

A single voice cannot create a fugue. By definition a fugue requires polyphony--many voices. The *Well-Tempered Clavier* contains only one fugue for two voices (e-minor Book I), most have three or four. Even the fugues that Bach wrote for solo instruments are polyphonic. Bach's genius was that he could create the illusion of polyphonic voices even on instruments like the violin and cello.

I remember years ago driving the Oregon coast by early moonlight and marveling at a flight of geese that paralleled my path for more than two minutes--the length of this fugue. I realized then that no theory could capture the beauty of their flight. Scientists can put them in a wind tunnel and quantify the mechanics of motion, empty stomachs and digest their diet, map migration routes with GPS, dissect and describe every muscle *reductio ad absurdum*, but no scientific method can capture the *real* bird--that free and wild creature on the wing.

From a theorist's perspective this is one of the most interesting fugues in the 48. It is tempting to dissect it further. I shall refrain from mentioning its complex

stretti (on the half measure in bar 16 and quarter measure in bar 23) because that would attempt the impossible--to capture the free and wild fugue, which got its name, you recall, from Latin: *fuga* for "flight," rel. to *fugere* "flee."