

Fugue No. 6

D minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book II

Johann Sebastian Bach

© 2004 Timothy A. Smith (the author)¹

To read this essay in its hypermedia format, go to the Shockwave movie at <http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/ii06.html>.



Subject: Fugue No. 6, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

This fugue verges on the frenetic. Just listen! Doesn't it make you feel restless...agitated...maybe even flustered? Whatever it evokes, Bach wrote it to reach your mind by way of your heart. This is because he thought of music as:

- rhetoric
- requiring invention
- referencing *loci topici*
- to produce an *Affekt*

Rhetoric

I shall use the sweet persuasion of rhetoric,...
and I shall add the grace of Music, a servant of mine
whose songs are sometimes happy and sometimes sad.

Boethius: Prose 1, Book II
*The Consolation of Philosophy*²

¹ You may print, copy, link to, or cite this document, for non-profit educational purposes, so long as credit is given to the author as per fair use. You may not reproduce this document electronically, enfold it into a web site, or incorporate it into a saleable product without written permission from the author.

² Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, trans. Richard H. Green (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002), 17.

How persuasive are you? At times have you wished to be utterly convincing? In your quest to persuade have you organized the flow of your thoughts, consulted a dictionary, honed your arguments or rehearsed your delivery? If so then you know something about *rhetoric*--the art of persuasion.

"Rhetoric" (from the Greek) means to flow or to speak. Integrating all aspects of communication from grammar to logic and style of delivery, rhetoric's goal is to appeal to the intellect by way of the emotions.

Today we associate rhetoric with language. But during Bach's lifetime rhetoric was systematically applied (especially by the Germans) to music. This was inspired by a belief that words and music are the same in purpose and effect. The logic was simple: if words and music are alike, then rhetorical devices applicable to words may also be applied to music.³

What are these devices? I have before me an 1890 textbook on rhetoric by one Dr. Kellogg, the table of contents of which identifies nearly two hundred topics--from synonym to synecdoche and metaphor to metonymy. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider more than a fraction having obvious connection with music: allusion, antithesis, climax, clause, contraction and expansion, contrast, elision, emphasis, energy, idiom, invention, irony, logic, meter, onomatopoeia, pathos, precision, recollection, rhyme, rhythm, sentence, phrase, style, subject, theme, thought, variety, and wit.

Now let's italicize those words pertaining to fugue. The most obvious is *subject*. This fugue's subject is analogous to a *sentence* in which there are two *clauses*. It is the fugue's *theme*. The *rhythm* of the first clause is *energetic* and *precise*, while its contour is *antithetical* (up vs. down). The *climax* of the second clause is full of *pathos*. Both parts are *idioms* that evoke feelings, the juxtaposition of which introduces *irony* with a touch of *wit*. If the subject's first clause denotes frustration, and the second clause sadness, then their combination is *metaphorical*. The fugue's 2nd development *recalls* the subject in a canon at the fifth (for *emphasis*), while the 3rd development inverts that canon for the sake of *variety* and *contrast*.

Requiring Invention

Of all the rhetorical tools in Dr. Kellogg's book, the most important is *invention*. He writes: "Great stress is laid upon Invention, the finding of the thought, that most important element in discourse of any kind." Nearly a third of his book is devoted to it. Such an emphasis reveals the author's classical training, for the study of rhetoric has always begun with invention.

Not surprisingly Bach also attached great importance to invention. In grammar school he would have been taught that rhetoric had five parts, the first two of which, *inventio* and *dispositio*, applied to musical composition. *Inventio*

³ Dr. Ledbetter writes (*Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier*, p. 76): "If the prelude could be considered the equivalent of an oration, the fugue was a debate." We know that Bach agreed with the rhetorical implications of fugue from Marpurg, who discussed this subject with him in Leipzig. Marpurg later described this fugue as a "contest" (*Streit*). If you want to study more about the rhetoric of fugue, I recommend *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* by Laurence Dreyfus (Harvard University Press, 1996).

involved finding motives having the power to sustain themselves and generate new ones. *Dispositio* required the development of those motives. What remained--*elocutio*, *memoria*, and *actio*--applied to the performer.

Bach's emphasis upon invention is illustrated by another of his keyboard cycles, famously titled: *Inventionen und Sinfonien* (Two and Three-Part Inventions). The stated purpose of this cycle was to teach his son, Wilhelm Friedemann, "how to compose good inventions and develop them well...and to acquire a taste for the elements of composition." In other words, Bach's *Inventionen* are more about rhetoric than keyboard technique (although they certainly develop that too).

Another way to illustrate the 18th-century concept of invention is to consider how some people use "reinvent" today. In a recent American presidential election, one Mr. Gore traversed the country announcing that he would "reinvent government." By this we understood that he would not invent a thing, but merely improve upon the invention of others by making it bigger and more elaborate. Although he was unable to achieve his goal of reinventing government, we must be thankful to Mr. Gore for having, by his own admission, "taken the initiative in creating the Internet."

Bach's fugue subjects are (in an odd way) like the inventions of Mr. Gore. Often made of motives that Bach himself had not "created," many were in the public domain. Others were concatenations of short figures from different works, or truncations of longer figures. So the subject of a Bach fugue many times represents the improvement of ideas passed from one generation to the next.

This subject represents the case in point. One might easily miss the fact that its head motive (outlining a tonic triad) and tail (a *lamento*) are, despite first impressions, fundamentally related. Both start on the tonic and converge on the dominant, albeit by contrary motion. In the hands of a skilled composer they might even be made to accompany each other.

David Ledbetter observes that the precompositional possibilities of this pair had been noted, well before Bach, by Albinoni (*Suonate* Op. 1) and Legrenzi (*Sonate* Op. 2). That Bach was familiar with the former is shown by his reworkings of Albinoni's *Suonate*. He may also have been familiar with Langloz's *partimenti*, containing stock subjects of which No. 39 resembles the subject of this fugue. Years later Bach would transform this thought into the legendary "royal theme" of his *Musical Offering*.

Referencing *Loci Topici*

The reason for such interest in these stock motives goes beyond their power to replicate themselves in novel ways. Composers of this era were attracted to them as much for their expressive possibilities. There was broad agreement, too, about the emotion that each would reference.

In the 18th century, the various methods for producing emotional responses in music were categorized as *loci topici*, after Aristotle's concept of *topoi*. (According to Aristotle, any rhetorical device was most effective when it was stripped of non-essential arguments and reduced to its minimally indispensable state.) You might think of *loci topici* as a recipe book for embodying moods and emotions in music.

The most important collection of *loci topici* surviving from this period was compiled by Bach's contemporary Johann Mattheson (*Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, 1739). He reasoned that the "perfect chapel master" would begin a composition by exploring one or more *loci* to stimulate the muse and create the proper mood (*Affekt*). He described eight species of *loci*, of which we shall consider two.

The most powerful was the *locus descriptionus*. This topic approximates what we call *word painting*. Here Mattheson advocated the use of emotionally laden idioms or descriptors--sometimes the musical equivalents of *onomatopoeia*.

We have identified one of the more poignant idioms, involving descending chromatics, as a *lamento*. Were this subject to have had words, it would typically have painted *lachrimae* (tears). The timeline represents this idea with accidentals. In the c-sharp minor fugue (*WTC book I*) Bach used a *lamento* to represent the suffering of Jesus, and in the [B-minor Mass](#) he used it to accompany the word *crucifixus*. In the cantata *Lord, My Soul Thirsts for Thee* (BWV 150) Bach employed a *lamento* beneath, "Christ who died, yet living, now helps us in our struggle."

Another important word painting incorporates borrowed triplet divisions like those of the subject's head motive. Monteverdi associated this rhythm with agitation or frustration. The consternation of this motive is compounded by its contour, pairs of triplets alternately moving in opposite directions. The timeline represents this idea in sixteenth notes.

Another of Mattheson's categories, the *locus notationis*, had to do with the transformation of notation. Today we associate this topic with counterpoint: canon, inversion, retrogradation, imitation, augmentation and diminution--techniques that have become nearly synonymous with Johann Sebastian.

Bach has employed the rhetoric of *locus notationis* in the many inversions of his subject's head motive. You'll recognize this technique as the timeline lifts pitches from the page and rolls them over. Note well the final development, especially the sequence of mm. 19-20. Rhetorically, the fugue heightens the vividness of its thesis (subject) by stating its antithesis in canon at the fifth! Of the foregoing passages Dr. Ledbetter writes (p. 268): "In the rhetorical theory of fugue, the imitation *per contrario tempore* represents conflict, in this case heightened by inversion."

To Produce an *Affekt*

If rhetoric's goal is to reach the head by way of the heart, then music is a particularly effective way to begin. It touches the heart by creating states of emotion. The Italians called these states *affetti*, and the Germans, *Affekt*. The equivalent word, in English, is "affect" (when used as a noun rather than as a transitive verb). Affect is very important in music of the Baroque; in fact so important that we refer to the "doctrine of affections" as one of its defining characteristics. Here the word "affections" has nothing to do with physical attraction, but rather the embodiment of pure feelings, moods, and emotions in the music itself, not the person listening to it. Music was not *about the* feeling, but its *equivalent in tones*.

This way of thinking about music began to take shape a couple of hundred years before Bach. What inspired it was the renaissance of Greek ideas about how music affects the emotions, therefore to be wisely applied. Plato advised that warriors should avoid the effete and debauched Hypolydian mode. In his ideal *Republic* (as in Aristotle's *Politics*) the perfect citizen would listen to music in the well-balanced and virile Dorian.

The Greek ideal was first applied (ca. 1610) to the madrigal and quickly spread to opera, both forms involving text. The reasoning went like this: if words and music each embodied an emotion, it was essential that they complement each other--the affect of one should not fight the other. So the ideal of the nascent baroque was that music should complement the words.

By the 18th century it had come to be understood that music's *Affekt* was centered in its motive--the kernel idea upon which any composition was based. *Affekt* was liberated from the word only after there had evolved sophisticated techniques for developing the motive so as to sustain it for the duration of a composition. During Bach's lifetime, the motive had developed a certain autonomy. It may be oversimplification, but the ideal of the high baroque was that a well-developed motive could carry *Affekt* without the assistance of words.

To be sure, the *Well-Tempered Clavier* has no words (at least none written by Bach). But Ebenezer Prout has remedied that situation. His purpose, to help his students remember each subject in the *WTC*, involved humor. For this fugue Prout wrote (in Cockney): '*Ark to the sound of the 'oofs of the galloping 'orse! I 'ear 'im comin' up Regent Street at night.* The countersubject (low voice) went: '*Is 'oofs go 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the 'ard 'ighway.*

Prout's lyrics represent a mnemonic triumph, but at what expense to the fugue's *Affekt*! If the baroque ideal required music to fit the words, the reverse was also true: "Words must fit the music!" Should he have retained his sense of humor, but fitted the subject's flustered head with the tears of its tail, Dr. Prout might have composed a more rhetorically consistent lyric: '*I'm in a dither, I'm in such a dither, my 'art is breaking; 'elp, oh please 'elp me find my keys.* As for the counter: '*Now 'ere's an 'ankie, 'ankie, 'ankie, 'ankie, 'ankie, 'ankie; won't you blow your nose?*