

# Fugue No. 15

G Major

*Well-Tempered Clavier Book II*

Johann Sebastian Bach

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**Subject:** Fugue No. 15, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

Wassily Kandinsky has been called the father of modern art, although he himself described his work as abstract or expressionist. Unlike the portrait, landscape, or still life, abstract art is nonrepresentational. This is not to imply that it lacks feeling--quite the opposite! The purpose of the abstraction is to express *pure* feeling, in color, line, and shape alone.

Although it emulates his later style, the abstraction to the right is not Kandinsky's. Its purpose is to illustrate how color, hue, and shape, in simple arrangement, can evoke emotions. How does it make you feel: sad, happy, pensive, lonely? If you feel *anything* in response to it, then the power of absolute expression is at work.

Kandinsky's insight about visual expression was inspired by music, which he regarded as the purest of abstract forms. He considered music to be the most highly evolved artistic genre because it could produce a mood without representation. He was particularly inspired by Arnold Schoenberg's music, in turn influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach.<sup>2</sup>

In 1911 Kandinsky heard Schoenberg for the first time. Favorably impressed, he wrote to the composer, whom he had never met. Their correspondence crested in 1914, the year that Kandinsky painted *Fuga*.

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<sup>2</sup> Schoenberg identifies the last part of his third Satire, Op. 28, as a fugue. The text extols "classical perfection."

Dear Professor, Please excuse me for simply writing to you without having the pleasure of knowing you personally. I have just heard your concert here and it has given me real pleasure. You do not know me, of course--that is, my works--since I do not exhibit much in general. However, what we are striving for and our whole manner of thought and feeling have so much in common that I feel completely justified in expressing my empathy. In your works, you have realized what I, albeit in uncertain form, have so greatly longed for in music.

Finding in music "the best teacher," Kandinsky felt that the arts could be drawn together. What so attracted him was music's ability to express "the artist's soul" without becoming mired in "the reproduction of natural phenomena."<sup>3</sup> To those who wonder, of Kandinsky's later style, what the artist is trying to do, he is painting music. He writes: "The sound of colors is so definite that it would be hard to find anyone who would try to express bright yellow in the bass notes, or dark lake in the treble."

Kandinsky often remarked that colors made him hear music. To experience what this must have been like, try painting over my graphic. In over brushing the inchoate form you'll arrive at a more complex and interesting composition of Kandinsky's own. This painting, from 1914, he titled *Fugue*.

Which makes me curious, how is an abstract work of art like a fugue? The problem, you see, is that a fugue is temporal; it takes time to unfold. Over time, the fugue's subject restates itself in different voices and keys. Once arranged, the parts of a fugue express themselves always in the same order.

But a painting is not like that. To the extent that we can assimilate visual forms at a glance, the graphic arts do not exist in time, but space. "Music," Kandinsky observes, "has at its disposal duration of time; while painting can present to the spectator the whole content of its message at one moment."

Yet, to fully appreciate Kandinsky's *Fuga*, and allow it to work its affect, also requires time. That is why galleries have benches and chairs! As you dwell on the painting, over time, your eye begins to travel, revisiting the form from its myriad approaches. You may even get up from your chair and walk toward the painting to study it more closely. Pacing back and forth, you could view the fugue from various perspectives before returning to your seat. In this manner the painting establishes its subject, restated, like that of the fugue, in many variations.

Having noted the correspondence between Schoenberg and Kandinsky, it bears repeating that they were drawn to each other for a reason. That reason had to do with *expressionism*, best explained in contrast with *impressionism*, the style in vogue early in their careers. While Kandinsky began as an impressionist, he ended his career as an expressionist.

Impressionism was devoted to representation of the physical world and fleeting "impressions" left upon the artist by shades of color, light, and shade. Impressionist painters were especially drawn to landscapes. Kandinsky's early style was filled with

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<sup>3</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, 1977) 19. The remaining Kandinsky quotations in this essay are also from this book.

landscapes reminiscent of Monet, Renoir, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Van Gogh.

As with their artistic counterparts, composers like Claude Debussy also sought to capture, in tones, the transitory impressions of the physical world. Titles like *Sails*, *The Sunken Cathedral*, and *Girl with the Flaxen Hair* betray an impressionist provenance.

In his mature style Kandinsky abandoned impressionism and turned inward, to the emotive life of the artist. Instead of representing the *objective* impressions made by nature (outside in), he expressed the *subjective* experience of human emotion (inside out). His paintings emote the world of feelings in their most impelling and concentrated forms. In 1911 he wrote that he valued artists "who consciously or unconsciously, in an entirely original form, embody the expression of their inner life; who work only for this end and cannot work otherwise."

The purity of emotion necessary to achieve his goal required Kandinsky to abandon what Richard Stratton has called "the last vestiges of natural representation," moving instead toward a non-objective style. He needed a new visual language, one rooted not in objects but a psychological understanding of sensation and perception. He desired to capture the spiritual essence of a thing rather than the physical object itself.

To express the inner emotive life, Kandinsky felt it necessary to abstract the psychological effects of line, shape, and color, which he likened to pitch, timbre, and rhythm in music. Thus, while he often refers to nature in a seemingly negative way--his own attempt to free himself from the representation of nature--it is important to understand that Kandinsky's aesthetic is not only cognizant of nature but utterly founded in nature. A straight line is quite unlike a curve in its effect upon the psyche; each has its own meaning, and produces its affect, by nature. Kandinsky called the affect of each artistic element its *innerer Klang*, which might be translated something like "intrinsic resonance."

Kandinsky's rejection of representation in favor of the inherently expressive meanings of line, shape, and color, is appropriately likened to Schoenberg's abandonment of tonality in favor of the unifying effects of interval and motive. In searching for novel techniques to express the roiling "stuff" of our sentient existence, both men were alike. No wonder they drew intellectual sustenance from each other.

Unfortunately many students have been taught to characterize both artists by what their creations lack. Kandinsky lacks representation and Schoenberg lacks tonal centeredness. Not only is this pejorative, it misses the mark. How much more enlightening to characterize their art for what it *has* than what it does not.

So, what do Kandinsky and Schoenberg *have*? The answer to this question will help us to understand why both men belong in the same paragraph as Johann Sebastian Bach. It will also make sense of this fugue in association with Kandinsky's. The answer to this question will reveal the essence of fugue, both as a form, and in the metaphorical connotations that I have consistently ascribed to it.

You see Kandinsky and Schoenberg are often (regrettably) portrayed as iconoclasts, people who reject natural and traditional forms in favor of artificial constructs. Actually both men were utterly devoted to the continuing historical development of western art. Here's how.

First, they express something. In this sense they are just like Bach, whose music also addresses the *affective domain*, the subjective world of feelings and emotions, i.e.

the world where each of us lives. This fugue is happy; it cannot be construed in any other way. Kandinsky's fugue is also joyous in a somewhat different way.

If Kandinsky and Schoenberg express the affective domain, Bach and the Baroque are justifiably considered their aesthetic precursors. There is very little difference between the 18th-century belief that emotional states are embodied in the motive and Kandinsky's *innerer Klang*. I am quite taken by George Bernard Shaw's observation that:

Sebastian Bach could express in fugue or canon all the emotions that have ever been worthily expressed in music. Some of his fugues will be prized for their tenderness and pathos when many a melting sonata and poignant symphonic poem will be shelved forever.

The second trait of all three artists is that their creations are motivic, rooted in small ideas with tremendous potential for repetition, elaboration, and development. In continuous transformation, these kernel ideas are "always the same, but not always in the same way."<sup>4</sup> Each element belongs to the work for every relationship that surrounds and connects it.

With all three artists, motive and economy of means is key to striking the proper balance between unity and variety. The legendary expressionist painter, Pablo Picasso, "expressed" the principle this way: "Forcing yourself to use restricted means is the sort of restraint that liberates invention. It obliges you to make a kind of progress that you can't even imagine in advance."

Finally, Kandinsky, Schoenberg, and Bach belong in the same breath because their art addresses the spirit. The religious dimension to Bach's music is well known and need not be developed here. As with Bach, the spiritual dimensions of Kandinsky and Schoenberg, their quests for meaning and purpose, shaped their art in tangible ways.

Schoenberg's 1898 conversion to Christianity, and return to Judaism in 1933, represents his desire to synthesize the concrete and abstract, a dualism that finds repeated expression in his music. In addition to his art, Kandinsky is also remembered for his 1914 explanation of color theory in quasi-religious terms--*Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (first titled *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*). In the seventh paragraph Kandinsky borrows Robert Schumann's words to reveal the purpose of art, "to send light into the darkness of men's hearts."

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<sup>4</sup> *Semper idem, sed non eodem modo*, from the beginning of Heinrich Schenker's *Free Composition*.