Fugue No. 20
A minor
_Well-Tempered Clavier Book II_
Johann Sebastian Bach

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To read this essay in its hypermedia format, go to the Shockwave movie at [http://bach.nau.edu/clavier/nature/fugues/Fugue44.html](http://bach.nau.edu/clavier/nature/fugues/Fugue44.html).

Subject: Fugue No. 20, _Well-Tempered Clavier_, Book II

I met a man upon the stair,
the little man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today.
Gee, I wish he'd go away.

Ogden Nash

The subject's head motive is mock serious. Theoretically its leading tone (G#) should resolve to tonic (the pitch “A”). After a cliffhanger pause, Bach mimes the contour, in miniature — ha, ha, ha, ha — a reply where the tonic remains unheard! So the tonic is that little man who wasn't there. Were I to add words to this subject, they'd be: “Where is my A (sigh) my missing A?”

...to which the fugue replies...

“Here is your A (sigh) but where's my E?” You see, the answer begins with “A,” but implies resolution to E, another little man who isn't there. The rest of the fugue is restless running, to and fro, high and low, in a frantic search for missing pitches.

For the time being, that's enough about little missing men. We'll come back in a minute. For now, (in all seriousness) this fugue cannot be serious. Dr. Ledbetter lists four indicators that Bach was being funny.

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First there is the “crudely direct” and “portentous cliché” of the diminished 7th in the head motive, which “can only be interpreted in the spirit of parody” (p. 315). Second is the designation of this work, by Bach’s son-in-law (Altnickol), as a fughetta, a term implying “lightness of treatment.” Third, we have the rising trill at the end of the countersubject, which Ledbetter calls “a figure of comedy” (p. 316). Finally, he writes: “the extra-elaborate version of the bass trill given by Altnickol in the last bar gives just the right touch of Schlendrian pomposity to the conclusion of this tour of the keyboard” (p. 316).

While there is humor here, there’s also the hint of depth. For many years I’ve had a go at communicating the idea of similar objects that are nested within themselves. These may be melodies, chord progressions, or rhythms. In the midst of these explanations I’ve habitually mentioned the Russian babushka doll. After one such reference, one of my students, a lovely Russian girl named Tatyana, gave me one of those dolls, which I now display whenever possible. With stacking dolls in hand, opening each to reveal a smaller doll upon the incidence of every nested sound, students really get it! Their eyes light up (and I think to myself, “major connection!”).

This fugue sports all three: nested melodies, chord progressions, and rhythms. Can you hear how the subject's tail echoes the head, but twice as fast? As for chord progressions, each statement of the fugal complex moves from I-V, followed by V-I. Each of these smaller progressions happens within the fugue’s overall tonal motion from i-V (mm. 1-13) and V-i (mm. 13-28).

The most important nesting of this fugue is metrical. There’s a lot of rhythmic activity going on here, and it involves an unusually wide range of pulses, each being a nested division of its parent:

- Two 32nd notes = one 16th
- Two 16ths = an 8th
- Two 8ths = a quarter
- Two quarters = a half note

With apologies to my Russian friends, I have called the little wooden doll a babushka. Tatyana informs me that the correct word is matryoshka, which means, “mother.” Here too the doll has something to say about fugal technique. One cannot be a mother without having had children: offspring who are of the same looks, character, and demeanor, as mom herself. That, my friends, is what a fugue is all about!