

The Art of Fugue (excerpts)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750)

In the last years of his life, when his duties at Leipzig's Thomaskirche had lessened, Bach had time to pursue his own creative musical interests. The fugue, which fascinated Bach throughout his career and was the "compositional proving ground of any aspiring composer of the 18th century," became the focus of his final works. Considered the apotheosis of the form, The Art of Fugue stands as the definitive exploration of complex fugal counterpoint.

The term counterpoint comes from the Latin, *punctus contra punctum*, or note against note where several melodic lines sound simultaneously. The fugue is an imitative contrapuntal technique where one melody or subject is voiced, then imitated and developed by the other voices.

The Art of Fugue has 18 movements or Contrapunctus each based on the same simple 4 measure subject and each in the key of D minor. As the movements progress, Bach varies the subject in increasingly complex ways creating exquisite harmonic movement using techniques of inversion, augmentation and diminution and working them into elaborate fugal forms such as counter fugue, stretto fugue, double or triple fugue and mirror fugue.

The fugue was no longer in style when this piece was written in 1750. Germany was being influenced by the Enlightenment and musical fashion was changing. Bach, unconcerned with fashion, remained passionately committed to this form which held fascination and personal significance. Religion was central in his life. He experienced God as a harmonic entity and music as an exploration of religious and metaphysical truths. Composing was not just an act of creation, but "imaginative research, leading to a musical science that seeks insight into the depths of the wisdom of the world." Fugue writing was musical theology to Bach, theology heard as sound.

String Quartet No. 4

Grazyna Bacewicz (1909 - 1969)

Andante. Allegro molto

Andante

Allegro giocoso

Grazyna Bacewicz was a prolific composer as well as a violinist of international stature who played a key role in advancing Polish music in the 20th century. Her music is only now being discovered in this country. Born in Lodz to a Lithuanian father and a Polish mother, she excelled musically from an early age. While studying violin and composition at the Warsaw Conservatory, she came under the influence of Polish composer and educator Karol Szymanowski whose teaching had a strong and lasting impact on her music. He encouraged

Bacewicz and her peers to keep their roots in native Polish folk song while exploring trends offered by modernism. It was through his encouragement that she accepted a fellowship from pianist Jan Paderewski to study composition in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. A year later she went again to the cosmopolitan city to study violin with Carl Flesch, and she maintained a close connection to Paris throughout her life.

Upon returning to Warsaw Bacewicz composed fervently, writing many chamber pieces combining folk music with the neoclassical style popular in 1930's France. Concurrently she served as concertmaster for the Polish National Radio Orchestra and was able to hear many of her works performed. When Poland was invaded by the Germans in 1939, Bacewicz and her family were displaced and normal musical life abated. Despite the fact that art and culture were seen as resistance, she continued to compose and give secret underground concerts in defiance of Nazi occupation. After the war Bacewicz renewed her career; however, the political and cultural situation in Poland restricted what she and her colleagues could do.

Describing herself as “a progressive composer,” she absorbed new styles throughout her life, and her post war compositions began to evolve in a more contemporary direction. In 1950, the Polish Composer's Union commissioned a string quartet from Bacewicz that was entered in the International String Quartet Competition the following year. It won first prize and remains one of her most popular and frequently performed compositions. “The 4th Quartet has a blend of folk elements, rhythmic vitality and imaginative post-tonal harmonies and wends a course between the lowbrow “socialist realism” mandated by postwar Poland's communist regime and the composer's more sophisticated interest in form and structure.”

Wig (after Beethoven's Op. 135, ii) (2019)

Donnacha Dennehy (b. 1970)

Donnacha Dennehy is an Irish composer, raised in Dublin, who got his musical start in primary school playing the tin whistle. By age 10 he had decided to be a composer. His summers were spent at his grandmother's in the countryside of County Kerry. During all night parties he listened to Sean-nos, a traditional style of Irish unaccompanied singing which was to become a significant influence in his later compositions.

As a boy Dennehy studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music which he remembers as being electrifying but terrifying. “I was a fish out of water. Most other students came from fancier stock where classical music was a big thing, they'd had it for generations.” Here he was introduced to 20th century musical rebels like Karlheinz Stockhausen, Philip Glass and Steven Reich. When attending Trinity College several years later, he said, “music flooded out of me. It felt so natural. I always get very itchy if I'm not writing music.” His education continued at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where he earned a masters degree and doctorate of

musical arts, then in the Netherlands with Dutch composer and pianist Louis Andriessen whom he credits for changing his life. Currently he is on the music faculty at Princeton University.

Dennehy is fascinated with the “luminosity of sound.” He uses microtones extensively to enrich his harmonies, incorporates electronic sonorities into acoustic music, and by stacking various sounds on one another, he creates elaborate pulse-based textures. His compositions are “marked by a sonic and rhythmic intensity and a kind of volatile tonality....in and out of an overtone-based focus.”

About the piece the Parker Quartet plays today, Dennehy wrote: “ I like that Beethoven's final complete composition, his op. 135 for string quartet, flies in the face of the narrative that many have tried to build around his late works, that of Beethoven the Romantic hero. But Beethoven was not just that, of course. Op. 135 hearkens back to the wit of his teacher, Haydn, probably the leading writer of string quartets before Beethoven himself. I love the joy and the playful pushing of form in this quartet, where wrong turns work like viruses in the music. My short quartet, *Wig*, builds off of these viruses in the second movement of op. 135.”

String Quartet no. 16 in F Major, Opus 135 (1826) Ludwigvan Beethoven (1770 - 1827)

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

Der schwer gefasste Entschluss. Grave, ma non troppo tratto. Allegro

The String Quartet Opus 135 was the last complete work Beethoven composed. Though usually grouped as one of his “late quartets,” it is separate in scope, tone and style. Really a post-late work, quite different from the four previous profound, lengthy, monumental and transcendent quartets, Opus 135 is smaller, a standalone little gem: lighthearted, shorter in length, with periods of levity and playfulness. Beethoven wrote it in October 1826 while staying with his nephew at a countryside estate northeast of Vienna.

The first movement in sonata form sounds almost improvisational and a bit sparse and mysterious. It begins with a four note motif in the viola, then melodies reminiscent of Haydn are shared among the players and developed in intricate counterpoint. The scherzo is energetic and playful, revealing Beethoven’s joking nature. He plays the rhythmical game, “hide the downbeat” while the music insistently careens ahead repeating an off kilter pattern. Then abruptly and emphatically a rhythmical footing is restored. The third movement titled, “a sweet song of rest, a song of peace” is flowing and warm. It unfolds tenderly into three slow variations on a simple theme played by the first violin and accompanied by serene chords in the lower register of the other instruments.

The opening of the fourth movement is tense and ominous but gives way to an energetic joyfulness. Beethoven titled the movement, "the difficult resolution." A slow menacing introduction asks the question, "must it be?" and the allegro that follows answers the question - "it must be!" The music develops in good humor until it is eventually interrupted again, more menacing this time, with a restatement of both question and answer. There has been endless debate about the meaning of this "difficult resolution."

Composing was a struggle for Beethoven. Making decisions about which version of a theme to include and how it should be developed were agonizing, so finishing a piece took a supreme act of will. In a letter to his publisher who was waiting for the manuscript of Opus 135, Beethoven wrote, "Here, my friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is why I have written the motto "The decision taken with difficulty - Must it be? - It must be, it must be!"