

BWV 1080 contrapunctus XIV

a completion from bar 233
by Geir Øyvind Eskeland

I am sitting in my bed, reading 'Accident or Design?' That is the title of a thesis authored by Indra Hughes. The thesis should be studied by everyone who aim to compose his own ending of contrapunctus XIV, since it provides plenty of useful and interesting information. However, I do not always agree with him. He claims to be able to prove that the correct number of bars needed to complete contrapunctus 14 is 47 (see page 88). This can not be right. If we desire to finish the quadruple fugue in the style of Bach, it would be technically impossible to do so with only 47 bars. I shall now explain why.

Developments

In his own outline, Indra Hughes makes space for only two developments in the triple fugue. Please consider the fact that Bach composed twice as many developments in the double fugue... If the triple and quadruple fugues receive fewer developments than the double fugue, it would be an error in

the logical build-up of contrapunctus XIV. Indra Hughes offers only three developments in the quadruple fugue. With only three developments Bach loses the possibility to fully complete the mission he set out for. You see, the quadruple fugue is the peak of the XIV! It is in the quadruple that he would prove his craftsmanship in composition, when four different themes switch places in all parts. Such an achievement is technically impossible with only three developments. Moreover, it is impossible to realise such a plan using only 47 bars. Do you not agree with me? Alright, perhaps not, but I win the next round called

Episode

A fugue does not only consist of a theme being constantly repeated. In a fugue there are also episodes, where we find sequences, modulations and cadences. In the episode, the composer can also explore the theme and the possibilities of the motives. Take a notice of bar 239; Bach shows us here that he wants us to continue the same motif already used throughout most of the double fugue. In Bach's double fugue there are four episodes, with 6, 3, 5 and 6 bars. We see that the shortest episode spans over 3 bars. Indra Hughes' longest episode has a span of 2... Bach uses the last motif from the 41-tone theme in his episodes. The motif needs one whole bar. In this fugue, 5 bars would be needed for a normal sequence + two answers. But because the sequence starts in the development section, 4 bars in the episode will do.

-Alright, but what about that episode by Bach with only 3 bars?

-In D minor he modulates as soon as the development is completed, which is why he does not always need 4 bars.

However, he cannot continue modulating like this, because he will 'never' come 'home' again to D minor. In the next episode he has to sequence, and then he needs 4 bars. When Indra Hughes' episodes spans over only 2 bars or less (!), it becomes impossible to sequence in the style of Bach, and the composition cannot progress as intended.

In the quadruple fugue, I experienced the applicability of the motif also in inversion. After the first development in A minor, I sequenced as earlier and ended up in C major, exactly where I intended! After the second development in G minor, I used the same sequence once more and arrived straight home – home to D minor! Could it be better? No, it could not. Also, the sequence inverted sounds very good. Such qualities given to us by Bach deserves to be used! But quality steals many bars... a theft we should consider committing!

Fanfare

I do not know of any academic expression for what Bach does at times, so I call it a fanfare. Bach uses this trick when he wants our attention; he says: "Ok guys, wake up because you are now in for something interesting!" One simple example can be found in the double fugue for organ, BWV 540. As soon as Bach has completed the second fugue, we receive a couple of bars with unexpected voicing in the upper parts, as well as surprising leaps in the bass. That is the fanfare. Because in the following bar we hear the first fugue theme again, a theme we haven't heard for a while. Bach wants our attention, he wants to remind us of the theme before he offers us the double fugue. We find fanfares as well in 'our' fugue. But the dimensions in this fugue are bigger, and therefore the fanfares are bigger as well. The last fanfare Bach composed, just before the debut of the triple, became

so extensive and dramatic that scientists were tricked by the composer! (see page 79) They think that Bach prepared to end the fugue! But that is not so. We have only reached the first development of the triple fugue. And we all agree that he planned a quadruple fugue, right? So, luckily, the goal

is still miles away. Imagine what we can look forward to – first a triple fugue, and after that a quadruple fugue! This is when it starts to get fun, while scientists are trying to tell us it's about time to finish it all off?!

Indra Hughes' outline has no room for a single fanfare. We need one before the 14 note theme is presented, since the theme has not earlier been presented in contrapunctus XIV. Besides, we need to make the most of it when the fanfare that alerts us of the entrance of the quadruple fugue comes.

-How can you be sure that Bach wished for another making-the-most-of-it fanfare?

-Because it was not a small one he made for the triple fugue. It becomes a disappointment concerning style and musicality if the last fanfare stands in the shadow of a previous one. My last fanfare is probably not great enough, but due to a lack of theoretical abilities I did not have the guts to write it more grand.

So my conclusion is this: It is not others' completions that are too long, like Indra Hughes says, but his own that is too short.

And who then is this lightly arrogant and instructive critic? I was born in Oslo in 1955. Started to listen to, play, whistle and hum Bach's music in 1972. In 1976-77, I read that Bach, especially in his older days was interested in numeral symbolism, so I started to count in Die Kunst der Fuge. Rather soon, I found the themes with 14 notes, in addition to the complimentary rhythmical theme in the end fugue with 41 notes.

The first theme of Contrapunctus XIV consists of seven notes. The Contrapunctus I theme consists of twelve notes. Both numbers, seven and twelve, is of religious importance. This is why I use both the theme from C1 and C5, not only the one from C5.

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