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Bach Family Meltdown!

C.P.E. melts down copper engraving plates to his father's "Art of the Fugue"

September 1756 - In what must be a devastating moment for the Bach family, Carl Phillip Emmanuel has offered up the copper engraving plates for one of his late father's seminal works, "Die Kunst der Fuge." Weighing about 100 pounds, the plates are for sale as scrap metal and C.P.E. has pledged to accept the first reasonable offer. After only 30 copies of the sheet music had been sold, even at a reduced price, C.P.E. was left with no choice.

Why was nobody interested in what C.P.E. advertised as Johann Sebastian Bach's "final work"? From the very start, *Art of the Fugue* presented musicians with copious riddles to solve. First and foremost: Is this a theoretical work, the old Bach strutting his stuff with an antiquated compositional form, perhaps intended as a treatise for his students? Or can this work actually be realized in performance? Bach wrote this work in open score, meaning that each voice is in its own staff, but the instrumentation is unspecified. How then, are we supposed to perform it?

Why would Johann Sebastian write such a work? Perhaps it makes sense in the context of his new obsession, during the final decade of his life, with large-scale works based entirely on one subject: the *Goldberg Variations* (1741-2), the *Musical Offering* (1747), and the *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch* (1748). Perhaps Bach was additionally motivated throughout his later years by the famous criticism published by Johann Adolph Scheibe in 1737, according to which Bach's music was "turgid and confused," its "beauty darkened by an excess of art" that buried the melody, detracted from the beauty of the harmony, had excessive ornamentation, and was difficult to play.

To add to the mystery, the final fugue (Contrapunctus XIV) has been passed on to posterity in an unfinished form. The first printed edition, prepared by Bach himself during the last two or three years of his life and seen through by C.P.E. in 1751, states that "while working on this fugue, in which the name BACH appears in the countersubject, the author died," engendering the romantic notion that Bach died pen-in-hand. Others speculate that the sheet of paper on which Bach was completing the fugue is simply lost, or that he intentionally left the work incomplete as though inviting the composer, the performer to run with it and finish their own story - an invitation, incidentally, accepted by more and more musicians over the past century.

Whatever the circumstances, and however few copies of the score C.P.E. was able to sell, *Art of the Fugue* is a work that over two centuries later musicians and scholars, such as here famous Bach scholar Christoph Wolff, would still be marveling about:

"Even in its unfinished state, *The Art of Fugue* stands before us as the most comprehensive summary of the aged Bach's instrumental language. At the same time, it is a highly personal statement; the letters BACH woven into the final movement represent much more than a fanciful signature. Theory and practice merge in this work. By letting the substance of the musical subject be logically uncovered and systematically exhausted, by employing traditional and novel techniques of composition as well as old and new elements of style, Bach created an autonomous work of art that embodies the character and universality of his art."

Above:
J.S. Bach's Subject for *Die Kunst der Fuge* and its permutations.

Most universally it is argued that these fourteen fugues and five canons are best performed on a keyboard instrument (organ or harpsichord, for example). However, the four-part fugues lend themselves beautifully to the string quartet formation. Tonight you will hear seven of the four-part fugues. Diderot String Quartet is eternally grateful to those 100 pounds of copper which did their part in disseminating some of the most stunning and beautiful art ever to be created.

HOT OFF THE PRESS:

Child prodigy Felix Mendelssohn Writes Second String Quartet at Age 18

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47) wrote his Op. 13 string quartet in 1827 (at the ripe age of 18), while he was living in Berlin. Every young musician dreams of playing it. So do we. If you've never heard it until tonight, then you're in for a treat. At the time of Op. 13's birth, Mendelssohn was swept up in a personal Beethoven mania. Beethoven had died just a few months earlier, and his last string quartets had been published two years before his death. These quartets were shocking and strange and heart-wrenching and all-around-monumental, and their bizarre departures from string quartet norms made them rather controversial. Conservative listeners surely fainted at the very sight of the sheet music for these quartets. However, Mendelssohn was among those who deeply appreciated Beethoven's late string quartets, and he studied them thoroughly. This fact is verified by the many tips o' the hat to Beethoven that Mendelssohn stuffed into his Op. 13 string quartet. If you manage to snag a copy of this Gazette for yourself, then we recommend you compare the following after the concert:

1. The first movements of Mendelssohn's op. 13 and Beethoven's Op. 132
2. The fugal middle sections of the second movements of Op. 13 and Beethoven's Op. 95
3. The last movements of Op. 13 and Beethoven's op. 132

No one could deny (with a straight face) the resemblances between those quartets.

We would be remiss not to mention that Mendelssohn's op. 13 contains FUGAL PASSAGES. And fine ones indeed.

A 19th-Century Bach Revival Mendelssohn Discovers Bach, St. Matthew

When Mendelssohn's family moved to Berlin in 1811, the young Felix began to rub elbows with Carl Friedrich Zelter (his composition teacher) and Sarah Levy (his aunt). Both Zelter and Levy were heavy hitters at the Sing-Akademie zu Berlin, a rocking musical establishment founded in 1791 that graced Berlin with increasingly elaborate and increasingly public concerts. Sarah Levy, it turns out, was a keyboard student of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (another of J.S.'s sons) and a patron of C. P. E. Bach. Her ties with the Bach family added to an ongoing Bachmania at the Sing-Akademie, and Felix Mendelssohn got swept up in the mania like a dust bunny.

In 1825 (two years before the creation of Op. 13), Mendelssohn's grandmother graced the young lad with a manuscript score of J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Four years later, in 1829, Mendelssohn (with the help of Zelter) produced and conducted a then-eye-opening and now-legendary performance of Bach's masterpiece, which had not been performed since Bach's death. Mendelssohn also frequently performed and edited the organ works of J. S. Bach, and legend has it that he even discussed the possibility of creating a complete Bach edition with Robert Schumann. In short: Mendelssohn was Bach-crazy. And his madness was infectious.

“Ist Es Wahr?” (“Is it True?”) Mendelssohn draws inspiration from own Lied, “Frage”

Just like Schubert with “Death and the Maiden,” Mendelssohn drew inspiration from one of his own Lieder (German art-song), composed a few months earlier. The Lied, *Frage*, is set to a poem by Johann Heinrich Voß.

**Ist es wahr? Ist es wahr?
daß du stets dort in dem Laubgang,
an der Weinwand meiner harrst?
Und den Mondschein und die Sternlein
auch nach mir befragst?**

**Ist es wahr? Sprich!
Was ich fühle, das begreift nur,
die es mitfühlt,
und die treu mir ewig,
treu mir ewig, ewig bleibt.**

Translation (Paul Dwyer):

**Is it true? Is it true?
That you always wait for me, there
in the leafy bower at the vine-covered wall?
And ask the moonlight and the stars
about me?**

**Is it true? Speak!
What I feel, only she understands
who feels it with me,
and who stays true
to me forever.**

You'll notice that the material in this song makes appearances throughout the Op. 13

string quartet, most notably as bookends for the entire piece. This musical self-borrowing ends up being another throwback to Beethoven: Mendelssohn writes “Ist es wahr?” on Op. 13's score, just as Beethoven had written “Muss es sein?” (“Must it be?”) on the last movement of his op. 135 string quartet.

We'd like to give huge shouts-out to the incomparable Nils Neubert for singing the Lied with us tonight and to the inimitable Dana Haynes for transcribing the work for voice and string quartet.



Nils Neubert, tenor

Opera, oratorio, recital, and festival appearances in the U.S. and abroad.

Recent Projects: Bach Vespers at Holy Trinity, Trinity Wall Street, Portland Baroque Orchestra, Voices of Ascension, Berkshire Choral Festival, Musica Sacra, TENET, 4x4 Baroque Music Festival, Musica Angelica, Musical Oratory, Ampersand, Sonoma Bach, Polydora Ensemble, Brooklyn Art Song Society, and the Beethoven Institute and Amnesty International at Mannes.

According to the Gazette's records, tonight's performance marks Neubert's solo debut with the Diderot String Quartet.

Fugues Unraveled In-House Fugal Expert Kyle Miller Reveals All

What exactly is a fugue? “Fugue” refers to a style of composition that began to take shape in the 16th century and then was more fully developed and explored in the late Baroque. Fugues have made appearances in music ever since, but later fugues (including those by Mendelssohn) almost always appear as a throwback to the wild ‘n’ wacky Baroque.

Fugue-writing is a complex, challenging, rules- and restrictions-driven style of composition. Writing a fugue is a feat of compositional strength, an act of utter nerding out. J. S. Bach was a master at writing fugues, and Mendelssohn clearly respected that mastery and enjoyed the art of fugue-writing himself.

A fugue must have two or more voices/parts. The basic musical “stuff” from which a fugue is created comes from a subject, which is a (usually relatively

simple) musical theme. A fugue may contain more than one subject, and the first one is always presented at the very beginning of the piece by a single voice. Each other voice then enters in turn by singing/playing the subject or a slightly modified version of it.

Once all of the voices have entered the fray, then the piece is in full swing! The composer basically has to juggle various statements of the subject along with a whole bunch of other musical material, much of which is derived from the subject. One wrong compositional turn can lead to unpalatable sounds, so the path to a rockin' fugue is a treacherous one. A skilled fugue-composer can turn the subject upside down, flip it and reverse it, make it last twice as long, and make it twice as short, just to name a few cunning tricks. How clever and delightful it all is! *Long live the fugue!*

Tonight's Performance

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750): *Die Kunst der Fuge*, BWV 1080

Contrapunctus I-IV

Contrapunctus VI in *Stylo Francese*

Contrapunctus VII *per Augmentationem et Diminutionem*

Contrapunctus IX

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847): Fugue for String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 81/4

pause

Mendelssohn: *Frage*, Op. 9/1 (arr. Dana Haynes)
Nils Neubert, tenor

Mendelssohn: *String Quartet in A minor*, Op. 13

Adagio – Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto – Allegro di molto

Presto – Adagio non lento

Thank You for Coming to Tonight's Concert!

*Please consider joining us for
our upcoming events:*

May 9 | 7:30 pm at Holy Trinity

Note Date Change!

Haydn & His Students

June 12 | 3pm in Boston

Schubert's *Winterreise* in an arrangement for string quintet, featuring Grammy-award winner Dashon Burton and double bass virtuoso Doug Balliett.

**If you can't make it to Boston, no worries!
We'll be bringing this program to you
right here at Holy Trinity on January 9!**