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FALL CONCERTS 2022

Filippo Gorini piano

Sunday September 18 2022

From the Artistic Director

Dear Friends:

How extraordinary it is to open a season with J.S. Bach's *The Art of Fugue*.

We are privileged to have the young Italian pianist Filippo Gorini introduce us to this great work, which he has been studying and focusing on since February 2020.

You will discover the heft and importance of this work through Filippo's opening lecture on the piece and the extensive notes in the program. I shall, however, say two things about this piece: Bach never completed it, and there is no clarity around which instrument it was written for.

There is clarity around the fact that Filippo (who made his Canadian debut on our stage in February 2019) will make this an extraordinary event for everyone in the audience.

We're presenting a fair amount of J.S. Bach this fall! We shall have the opportunity to hear the *Goldberg Variations* performed by Sir András Schiff on the piano in October, followed by a performance on the harpsichord by Jean Rondeau in November. These concerts are an embarrassment of riches and we are very lucky indeed.

We are delighted to welcome back our Season Sponsor, the Peak Group of Companies. We are most grateful to them for their steadfast support, and to Elaine Adair for sponsoring this performance.

We would also like to thank the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia, and our accommodation partner, the Westin Bayshore hotel, for their support.

We extend a warm welcome back to the VRS, and if this is your first time, we hope you have a wonderful experience.

Most sincerely,



Leila Getz



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Program

Filippo Gorini piano

Sunday,
September 18, 2022 2:00 pm
Vancouver Playhouse

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

The Art of Fugue BWV 1080

Contrapunctus I, a quattro

Contrapunctus II, a quattro

Contrapunctus III, a quattro

Contrapunctus IV, a quattro

Canon alla ottava

Contrapunctus V, a quattro

Contrapunctus VI, a quattro in stylo francese

Contrapunctus VII, a quattro per augmentationem et diminutionem

Canon per augmentationem et in contrario motu

Contrapunctus VIII, a tre

Contrapunctus IX, a quattro alla duodecima

Contrapunctus X, a quattro alla decima

Contrapunctus XI, a quattro

Canon alla duodecima, in contrapunto alla quinta

Contrapunctus inversus XII, a quattro - forma recta

Contrapunctus inversus XII, a quattro - forma inversa

Contrapunctus inversus XIII, a tre - forma recta

Contrapunctus inversus XIII, a tre - forma inversa

Canon alla decima, in contrapunto alla terza

Fuga XIV a tre soggetti (fragment)

[approx. 95 minutes]

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Filippo Gorini piano

Early Life & Education: Having graduated with honours from the Donizetti Conservatory in Bergamo, and completing a Postgraduate Course at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg, Filippo continues his studies with Maria Grazia Bellocchio and Pavel Gililov, and is mentored by Alfred Brendel. He is a scholarship recipient of the Lichtenstein Music Academy.

Performances: Filippo's concert appearances in Europe have drawn unanimous acclaim. He has performed on many prestigious stages such as the Konzerthaus Berlin, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Laeiszhalle and Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Paris Philharmonie, Società del Quartetto di Milano, Flagey Studio Brussels, Royal Academy of Music London, Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, Beethovenhalle Bonn, and Sale Apollinee at Teatro La Fenice in Venice.



Photo credit: Simon Pauly

Besides his extensive solo and chamber music repertoire, Filippo actively follows the world of contemporary composition, and has played works by composers such as Stockhausen, Kurtág, Lachenmann, and Gervasoni, as well as premiering new works. His multidisciplinary, multi-year project focusing on Bach's *Art of Fugue* is funded by the Borletti Buitoni Trust. It started with the release of the work on Alpha Classics and continues in 2022 with a recital tour and the release of a series of filmed conversations on Bach's music between Filippo and personalities such as Peter Sellars, Frank Gehry, Sasha Waltz, Alexander Sokurov, Alexander Polzin, Alfred Brendel, and many more.

Recordings: Filippo's debut disc featuring Beethoven's Diabelli Variations was released in August 2017 on Alpha Classics, and has garnered critical acclaim, including a Diapason d'Or Award and stellar reviews on The Guardian, BBC Music Magazine, Le Monde, and Gramophone. His recent recording of *The Art of Fugue*, by Bach, also on Alpha Classics, has matched this acclaim and was nominated one of the best albums of 2021 by Le Monde.

Awards & Prizes: In 2015, he received both the First and Audience Prizes at the Telekom-Beethoven Competition Bonn and later, in May 2018, the prestigious award "Una vita per la musica - Giovani" of the "La Fenice" Theatre; he has also received the Beethoven-Ring Prize at the Beethovenfest, Bonn (2017), the award of the "Young Euro Classic" Festival in Berlin (2016), and First Prize at the "Neuhaus Competition" of the Moscow Conservatory (2013). Filippo's strong artistic personality has led him to receive the "Premio Abbiati" as best soloist of the year 2022.

Filippo Gorini is represented by Keynote Artist Management, London, UK

Program Notes

Johann Sebastian Bach The Art of Fugue BWV 1080

By the 1740s Bach had largely withdrawn from composing new church music for Leipzig's Thomaskirche, devoting his creative energies instead to a series of large-scale projects that responded more directly to his own personal and professional interests. These monumental works were encyclopaedic in scope, systematic in design, and concentrated in focus.

That focus was the practice of *canon* and *fugue*, the two most intellectually challenging musical genres of his time.

The year 1744, for example, saw the publication of the second book of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, a companion to the first book of 1722, both sets of which made the case for equal temperament in keyboard tuning by providing a collection of 24 preludes and fugues in all the major and minor keys. Each of the 48 individual fugues in this two-volume work was composed with its own individual fugue subject, demonstrating, as Bach surely intended, the wide variety of theme types to which fugal procedure could be applied.

Most of the other major works from this decade take the inverse approach, showing the variety of contrapuntal techniques that can be applied to a *single* theme or motive. These 'monothematic' works include the *Goldberg Variations* (1741), the *Musical Offering* (1747) and the *Canonic Variations on 'Von Himmel hoch da komm' ich her'* (1747).

But crowning this series of learned essays is *Die Kunst der Fuge*, a collection of 14 fugues and 4 canons that illustrate the range and variety of contrapuntal techniques available to the serious composer, from the elementary to the arcane. In the manuscript each fugue is labelled *contrapunctus*, in Latin, to enhance the magisterial authority of the project. The work was largely complete by 1742 but Bach continued to revise it and add movements throughout the decade, leaving it, at his death in 1750, with its final massive fugue incomplete. The manuscript was edited by his sons and published in 1751.

The Motto Theme



Running through *The Art of Fugue* is a theme of Bach's own invention that acts as a kind of 'motto' for the work as a whole. The unique inner architecture of this theme is specifically designed to maximize the potential for 'motivic echoes' in whatever texture it appears.

Its triadic opening, affirming D minor as its stable tonal centre, sounds almost fanfare-like, enabling the theme to stand out in a multi-voice texture by virtue of its easily recognizable intervals: a rising 5th and two falling 3rds.

The remaining portion, however, presents the exact opposite, moving in *scalar* fashion, by step, to outline an *unstable* interval: the diminished 4th C#-F. This implied dissonance requires a resolution on the tonic (D) that arrives in the 5th bar.

In support of this harmonic resolution is an accelerating *rhythmic* pattern as the theme moves along – from half notes to quarter notes to 8th notes – providing a slingshot-like release of momentum driving the theme home to its conclusion.

Bach's theme is a miniature masterpiece all on its own, but what he manages to do with it in *The Art of Fugue* is nothing less than miraculous.

The Simple Fugues: I to IV

The Art of Fugue is organized so that the fugues presented illustrate fugal procedure in increasing order of intellectual and compositional complexity: from the simplest to the most intricate. The 'simple' fugues present the theme -- called the *subject* in fugue parlance -- in a texturally clear manner that allows it to stand out at every appearance. In the simple fugues there is a clean division between single entries of the theme and background contrapuntal detail, so that the ear is never confused as to what to listen for.

Contrapunctus I seems to emerge from the depths of time, its key of D minor evoking the austere severity of a work in the Dorian mode from centuries past. A persistent 8th-note rhythm soon comes to dominate its onward progress with lively interchanges between the voices in sequential repetition occurring frequently in the *episodes*, i.e., the sections in which the fugue subject is not sounding in the texture.

Contrapunctus II takes a stylistic turn towards France by adding a dotted rhythm to the subject, a clear reference to the French preference for instrumental pieces with a jaunty, dance-like character.

In *Contrapunctus III* the fugue subject appears in both its inverted and right-side-up forms. But the emotional character of this fugue is dominated by the slip-slide-y nature of its highly chromatic *countersubject*, the term for a secondary theme that accompanies the subject virtually every time it appears.

Contrapunctus IV uses the inverted form of the subject, combining it a constant stream of motivic chatter that merrily repeats two fragments of the original right-side-up version. The first comes from the four descending 8th notes at the tag-end of the original theme, the second from the falling 3rds of its opening triad -- which in their sequential repetition many scholars have thought sound like cuckoo calls.

Canon alla ottava

Four two-voice canons are found in Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, each based on some variation of the motto theme. Filippo Gorini has judiciously placed these canons on his program as 'boundary markers' to set off the five principal groupings of fugues in the work.

A *canon*, for those unfamiliar with the term, is simply a round. Its answering voice, however, need not enter on precisely the same pitch as the leading voice, as it does in such round songs as "Frère Jacques" or "Row, row, row your boat". Canons take their full technical name from the interval at which their answering voice *does* enter. "Frère Jacques" or "Row, row, row your boat", then, would be referred to as *all' unisono* (at the unison).

The first round in this work is *alla ottava* (at the octave) and it uses an elaborated version of the motto theme in which many single melody notes are transformed into triple 16ths while others are shortened into staccato 8ths. The resulting dance-like rhythm is almost gigue-like.

The Stretto Fugues: V to VII

In his second grouping of fugues Bach ups the intellectual ante a notch by introducing procedures that significantly increase the density of motivic reference in the fugal texture. He does this in two ways.

First, he introduces *stretto*, which is to say the close overlap of different voices singing out the same melody. The effect is like that of hearing a marching band playing a tune that echoes back from nearby buildings a beat or two later.

Second, he presents the fugue subject not just upside-down, i.e., *inversion*, as in previous fugues, but in *augmentation* (double note values) and *diminution* (half note values) as well. Being able to follow these various versions of the fugue subject presented at different time scales -- often addressing the ear simultaneously -- requires a degree of eyebrow-knitting concentration that not all listeners are born to achieve. Give yourself extra points if you notice how the opening statement of the subject in all three of these fugues is inverted in the answer.

Contrapunctus V uses a dotted-rhythm version of the motto theme with passing notes filling in many of its intervals. With all this passing motion the texture becomes creamy smooth but intensity builds up as the distance between overlapping entries in stretto is gradually reduced to a single beat.

Contrapunctus VI is another fugue in the French style, but not the French *dance* style. The abundance of heavily dotted rhythms, rushing 16th-note figures and ringing trills suggests more the pompous stop-and-

go character of a classic Lullyan French overture. The same filled-in version of the subject is used as in the previous fugue, in both upright and inverted forms, both regularly paced and in diminution.

Contrapunctus VII is denser still in its tossed salad of motivic references, with the fugue subject working its way in plodding augmented note values from the bass all the way up to the soprano, in both right-side-up and inverted versions. There are virtually no episodes in this fugue since almost every bar is frothing, churning or gently burbling with some version of the subject.

Canon per augmentationem et in contrario motu

This canon sounds almost modern with its jagged melodic lines, ecstatic leaps and sudden chromatic detours. The contours of its two voices in canon are derived from the principal notes of the motto theme, but the answering voice is the inversion of the leading voice – in augmentation (!). This has the effect of making it sound like a ‘walking bass’ to the jazzy-sounding meanderings above.

Then, just to make things interesting, the two voices switch roles halfway through, the ‘walking bass’ becoming the ‘walking treble’ and the former soprano line going squirrely in the nether regions of the keyboard.

The Multiple-Theme Fugues: VIII to XI

Bach’s next step up in complexity is to write fugues with more than one principal theme, each theme getting its own *exposition* (the term for the opening section of a fugue in which all voices present the fugue subject in turn).

Contrapunctus VIII is a triple fugue, i.e., a fugue with three separate thematic subjects. The opening theme is full of open intervals, wandering chromatically to outline the melodic descent of an octave. The second, coming after a resolute cadence, is a whinging lament in continuous 8th notes clearly audible in the texture by virtue of its insistent rap-tap-tap of repeated notes. Finally a third subject, a segmented descendant of the motto theme, exhales into the texture like laboured breathing, three quarter notes at a time, with a rest on the first beat of each bar. These three subjects are introduced in successive expositions, after which they constantly bump into each other until, *mirabile dictu* (wondrous to report), they all get combined together at a final gathering of the clan to create a climactic ending.

Contrapunctus IX, by contrast, is a peppy double fugue with an opening fugue subject that begins with an octave leap, making it instantly recognizable in the texture. This is eventually paired with an augmented version of the motto theme to create a merry-go-round of toe-tapping excitement so infectious, that this fugue has even been recorded by the Swingle Singers.

A mood of calm reflection returns in the double fugue of *Contrapunctus X*, which opens with a theme in sighing three-note cells, as in *Contrapunctus VIII*, and which later encounter a dotted version of the motto theme with filled-in passing notes. A small number of motives is presented in a seemingly endless variety of guises, unfolding in a constant flow of varied melodic lines.

The mighty triple fugue of *Contrapunctus XI* uses the same three subjects as animated *Contrapunctus VIII*, presenting them first in their inverted form and then in their original upright versions. But the emotional character of this fugue is much different, more profoundly searching in its advanced chromaticism, a chromaticism that seems to be reaching out to the furthest edges of the sound world.

Canon alla duodecima, in contrapunto alla quinta

This canon bubbles over with ear-tickling rhythmic effervescence, presenting an elaborated version of the original motto theme constructed out of roiling sextuplets that alternate with duple-value 8ths. The interval of a falling diminished 7th adds rhetorical drama to the melodic line.

The Mirror Fugues

Not content to have merely created two separate fugues in *Contrapunctus VIII* and *Contrapunctus XI* from the original and inverted forms of the same fugue subjects, Bach sets himself the challenge of writing pairs

of single-subject fugues in which not just the fugue subjects but *all* the individual voices, and the textures as a whole, are exact mirror images of each other.

So the bass line in the first fugue of each pair become the soprano line of the matching second fugue, but with its intervals inverted, and similarly with the tenor and alto lines. The vocal lines and the textures they embody perform this switch in the middle of each so-called “mirror” fugue.

Contrapunctus XII preserves the melodic shape of the original fugue subject exactly, but puts it in triple metre to create a gently lilting rhythmic feel in both fugues of the pair.

Contrapunctus XIII alters the theme considerably with filled-in triplet 8th notes and a perky octave leap, that combined with this fugue’s pervasive dotted rhythms makes you actually forget what a dazzling intellectual feat is unfolding in your ear.

Canon alla decima, in contrapunto alla terza

The appeal of this utterly charming canon lies in its simplicity and easy-to-follow melodic lines, which mix long notes with innocently swaying triplet 8ths. Bach seems to depart from his austere pose as the learned composer of intellectually rigorous textures by offering the performer a bit of freedom at the final cadence with the indication *cadenza* – an invitation for the performer to improvise a bit of fancy fingerwork of his own to end the piece in style.

The Last Fugue

Bach’s final fugue in this series remained unfinished at his death in 1750 and the specifics of its overall architecture have been the subject of debate amongst Bach scholars. Given the systematic increase in intellectual complexity and contrapuntal skill demonstrated in successive groups of fugues as the work progresses, it is reasonable to assume that this 14th fugue was meant to crown the set by displaying Bach’s absolute mastery of the form in some way. But how?

The answer seems to lie in the three themes that Bach chose for this multiple-subject fugue, themes that sum up in one final work the different styles of melody presented so far and the emotional characters they evoke.

The first subject is a near relative of the motto theme, concentrating in long note values on the principal tones of the D minor triad. Proceeding at an even quarter-note pace, it recalls the austere mood of *Contrapunctus I*.

The second subject presents another kind of melody, ornamenting the motto theme in a continuous stream of 8th notes that twist and wind in a pattern that contrasts with the placid calm of the opening section.

The third subject increases the musical tension significantly, moving chromatically within a small range around the notes B-flat, A, C and B natural – not coincidentally the German musical spelling of the composer’s own name: B-A-C-H. And it is just at the point when Bach begins to combine all three subjects together that the manuscript suddenly ends, leaving us breathlessly bereft of what contrapuntal marvels might have come in the bars to follow.

* * *

But is it ‘music’?

The extraordinary feats of contrapuntal skill displayed by Bach in his *Art of Fugue* have given rise to bewildered push-back amongst astonished commentators, prompting them to ask: *Is this really music?* The mere act of posing such a provocative question implies an answer in the negative and is motivated by two distinct lines of thought.

The first sees the work as purely didactic, as *Augenmusik* (music for the eyes) intended merely for silent study by aspiring contrapuntists rather than as a work intended for the enjoyment of audiences in live performance. This, however, is a false dichotomy, as the artistic merit of Chopin’s *Études*, Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos* and Bach’s own *Klavierbüchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* amply prove.

A second, more serious objection to the work’s suitability as concert music is a reproach often levelled at

12-tone serial compositions: that the essential structuring elements of these works is beyond the capacity of human perception to appreciate. And admittedly, the likelihood that even the most alert listener – with perfect pitch and a fresh injection of espresso – might remember the initial scoring of one of Bach's mirror fugues well enough to notice its complete textural inversion halfway through is remote indeed.

And yet, as the saying goes in software development: this is not a *bug*, it's a *feature*.

In the worldview of early-18th-century religious thought, which Bach shared, God was immanent in all Creation. All things on earth were imbued with the presence of the Divine, and manifested that presence in all its astonishing variety of forms and its underlying unity of purpose. To be bewildered by this astonishing variety and unity of purpose was to engage in an act of worship.

Bach, whose many manuscripts are marked with inscriptions betokening deference to the greater glory of God, conceived of his creative musical output as a sonic parallel to the variety and orderliness of the created world, a world that must inevitably surpass all human understanding.

So every fractal echo in his fugal textures of motives from the original motto theme – every rising 5th, every falling 3rd and every melodic phrase in stepwise motion – is a theological statement, standing proxy to echoes of the Divine in the natural world. In this regard, experiencing bewilderment at the dazzling complexity of Bach's fugal textures is as natural as feeling overwhelmed with awe when contemplating the patterns of the stars in the night sky.



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Program notes by
Donald G. Gíslason 2022

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