

The Art of Fugue

A conversation between Carlos Alvarado and Richard Griffiths.

Richard: *Carlos, we in the Choir notice that fugues hold a special place in your musical heart. What is a fugue and why are fugues so important to you?*

Carlos: To describe the art of fugue properly is a very complex and challenging task for me, and, I guess, for every professional musician. That's why, from a very superficial view, I will share some ideas that hopefully can help to give readers a better understanding about the fugue, an art that in my opinion is an incredible way of writing music, a technique that perhaps represents one of the most sophisticated achievements of human thinking in musical terms.

Richard: *I have always assumed that fugues developed from canons and rounds over the course of many years during which the arts of harmony (chords supporting the melody) and imitation (multiple voices copying or echoing each other) were refined. Is a fugue different from a canon and from a round?*

We need to first understand the many dimensions of music. Music can be created in many different ways. Every day we listen many different kinds of music: Rock, Pop, Folk, Jazz, World music (with many traditions and nationalities), Classical, etc. But if we activate our perception and listen to the music carefully, we will be able to describe almost, from a visual perspective, the "texture" or the "fabric" of a particular song or musical piece; by recognising whether it is a simple melody in "unison" or maybe, it is a melody with a certain type of instrumental accompaniment. Maybe it has other voices; two voices or more melodic lines making "harmonies" together, or playing a game of "question and answer", or imitating each other, being part of a round, etc.

We can also describe the instrumentation, the rhythmical figures or time signatures behind a melody or a voice. In other words, we could say that music in general is multidimensional; from whatever angle you want to describe what you are hearing, you can find a form or a structural work that contains colours, lines, different perspectives; it can be horizontal, alternating multilinear melodies creating counterpoint, imitations, canons and fugues. Or it can be vertical with structures as chords connected in order to create for example a military march or a hymn (homophonic texture).

Richard: *So in this description, could the fugue be said to have both a horizontal dimension in the lines of music, and a vertical dimension in the underlying harmonies?*

Carlos: For me the emphasis is much more on the horizontal than the vertical. From a visual point of view I wanted remark the texture and difference between polyphony (counterpoint) and homophony. I think the fugue is a style of writing that looks linear and horizontal because of the imitation between independent voices or melodies. While homophony sounds and looks vertical as all voices are not independent, they are just part of a chord (harmony) that will be connected with others in order to accompany a melody, as happens with hymns and some marches. A good example of homophony is the madrigal by Orlando di Lasso "Io ti voria contar la pena mia" that we have sang with our Choir.

Richard: *Is “fugue” a style of writing or is it a fixed format with a given structure?*

Carlos: It is a compositional technique that uses a systematic imitation of a principal theme called the Subject that repeats simultaneously in melodic lines, imitating each other and using all elements and rules of counterpoint to make them coincide. The Subject usually is a phrase or a statement comprising one or more short motifs, those motifs later being the material for imitation and contrapuntal sequences and episodes that often are used to reconnect to the main subject, or will modulate to bring a re-exposition or recapitulation of the main structure of the fugue.

Richard: *Are all fugues written in the same structure?*

Carlos: They are built to the same fundamental structure, but each is different in the detail.

The fugue starts with the Exposition in which the principal theme, or Subject, is used successively in each of the imitating voices or parts. The first statement of the Subject is in one voice alone. While this voice continues, the second statement enters, transposed to the key of the dominant (the fifth note of the scale) and is called the answer. The third voice returns to the main key and, if it is a four-part fugue, the fourth voice will be mostly in the dominant key again. If the melody of the answer is an exact transposition of the subject, into a new key, it is a real answer; often, however, the melody will be slightly manipulated to avoid a true change of key, in that case it is a tonal answer.

The answer is typically accompanied by counterpoint in another voice; if the same relationship continues throughout the fugue, that contrapuntal voice is called the countersubject. The relation between subject and countersubject must work in all voices regardless of which is above or below; that means that the counterpoint is invertible and sustained. In many fugues, however, there is no countersubject so the counterpoint is free and doesn't repeat systematically.

As I have mentioned before, after the exposition, the melodic material of the subject will be used for a development that will contain episodes and sequences, modulations with short imitation passages, strettos, etc, before the complete subject appears again in one or more voices. When the complete subjects are played, we can talk about a recapitulation of the fugue.

Richard: *Carlos, this all sounds very complex!*

Carlos: Wow! I am getting confused myself!

Richard: *Can we do a recap here?*

The fixed part of the fugue is the sequence of initial entries. The first is in the tonic key, the second entry is in the dominant key, the third back in the tonic key and any further entries may be in other keys. Voices continue singing after their entry with supporting or contrasting motifs which may include other material such as a Countersubject.

As an example, in the Amen Chorus from Messiah (pages 225 and 226), the Basses have the first entry in D, then the Tenors in A, then the Altos in D, and finally the Sopranos in A again. This pattern occurs in almost all fugues.

Then you mentioned a number of ways in which the music can develop, using some or all of the motifs in the Subject. Composers try to incorporate as many devices as they can, but not necessarily to a fixed pattern.

Carlos: Yes, and there are times when a composer is trying things out for himself, saying, “Now, this is not a specific rule or technique, but what would happen if I were to do this?” Sometimes it is like an intellectual game, and somehow the amazing technical skills always deliver beautiful music too.

Richard: Carlos, you suggested that readers may like to watch two videos which show how a fugue is constructed. The first is of a fugue in G minor by JS Bach with a wonderfully surprising final chord of G major. . The link is <https://youtu.be/ddbxFi3-UQ4> . The graphics show how the structure works, and how the four lines of music fit together.

The second video at <https://youtu.be/U85-4EYgZk4> is an amusing but very informative piece by the famous Canadian pianist Glenn Gould called “So you want to write a fugue”. Again it uses visuals to show how the structure works. In this case it is more complex as in addition to a quartet of voices there is a role for a string quartet.

Of course, to add to the complexity, there are also “double fugues”, like the Kyrie in the Mozart Requiem, and “triple fugues”, like that in the development section of the first movement of Beethoven’s Ninth. They must be fiendishly complex to write!

But back to the history of fugues. Carlos, was Bach the first composer to write fugues?

Carlos: No. I would say that fugue is related with all the evolution of western polyphony but especially with the most rigorous imitative technique known as Canon, in which each successive voice has the same melody. Canons appeared in the 13th century and have been an important resource in Western counterpoint till today.

In the Choir, we have sung a few canons by Mozart, but probably the most famous of them are Pachelbel’s Canon, composed in 1680 by the German composer Johann Pachelbel; and the very familiar French canon or round: “Frère Jacques”. The name fuga was applied to canonic pieces as early as the 14th century, but the real ancestors of the fully developed fugue are 16th century ensemble canzonas, such as those by Giovanni Gabrieli, as well as the fugue-like ricercare by composers such as Fescobaldi.

Richard: Which period was the high point of writing fugues?

Carlos: The works of Bach stand at the very pinnacle of the history of the fugue. His fugues remain unsurpassed in their extraordinary variety and in their individual perfection. No other composer produced so many brilliant examples of fugue for every possible group of instruments available at

his time. “The Well-Tempered Clavier”, “The 48 Preludes and Fugues” (two books of preludes and fugues in all major and minor keys), “The Musical Offering”, “The Art of the Fugue” are amongst many other works by J.S Bach which form an essential legacy to all generations after his time.

But not less impressive is the legacy that Handel let to us with his fugues in concertante style in his Concerti Grossi, for example, and of course the choral fugues in Messiah. Other great composers wrote choral fugues, for example, Mozart in the C Minor Mass, K 472 (1782) and the Requiem, K 626 (1783). The finale of the Jupiter Symphony No 41 in C major, K 551, is a sonata form movement with extensive passages of fugal writing in quintuple invertible counterpoint and is a unique example in the history of music.

Beethoven uses fugal techniques in many of his quartets, masses and symphonies, but the most impressive is in the enormous finale of the piano sonata in B-flat major Opus 106 “Hammerklavier”, in which he uses all possible contrapuntal techniques, melodic inversions, augmentation, the subject written in backward, note for note, etc.

Richard: *Writing fugues seems to have become less common after Beethoven. I can think of some choral items the Choir has sung such as Brahms’ inspirational German Requiem with glorious fugues in the third and sixth movements, but not much else.*

Carlos: You are almost right. In the Romantic era, post Beethoven, music moved away from a mainly religious focus to more of an entertainment. Composers had to satisfy their audiences rather than their patrons or the Almighty. The Romantic era composers started to develop their own styles and structures, but many such as Liszt, Mendelssohn, Schubert and Brahms also continued to use the fugue from time to time.

Richard: *Do contemporary composers write fugues?*

Carlos: Yes, they do. In the twentieth century we can find many examples of composers using the fugue technique. One beautiful example is the last movement of Benjamin Britten’s “Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell” (The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra).

Richard: *There are many recordings of the full work: this link is a video of just the Theme and the Fugue with the score in the picture. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dD4-DRHwIQE>*

Carlos, you also mentioned another example, Shostakovich’s “24 Preludes and Fugues” Op. 87. I found this video of excerpts which show the score [Shostakovich Prelude & Fugue No 1 in C major Op 87 - YouTube](#) . This is extraordinary music. It is on the one hand very much Shostakovich’s tonality and soundscape, but also shows the ever present influence of the great master, JS Bach.

Richard: *Carlos, do you have a favourite fugue?*

Carlos: Oh dear, what a question! Can I choose more than one? Here are some of my favourites.

- JS Bach: Mass in B minor: Cum Sancto Spiritu is an incredibly majestic fugue in five parts.

- Handel: Messiah: And with his stripes, is an incredible fugue with a dramatic Subject in the shape of a cross. Handel manages to make fabulous music whilst abiding by all the rules.
- Mozart: Requiem: Kyrie: A wonderful double fugue written by a composer who knew he would soon be going to meet his Maker.
- Schubert: Wanderer Fantasy for Piano: the final section, a complex fugue, is widely considered to be Schubert's most technically demanding piece for piano.
- Shostakovich: 24 Preludes and Fugues: No 1: as Richard has said, an incredible fusion of the modern and the Baroque with both Shostakovich's and Bach's trademark techniques all over it.

Richard: *How do you learn to play a four-part fugue on the keyboard?*

Carlos: This is of course one of the most difficult things to do on piano. You have to concentrate very, very hard!

JS Bach wrote a five part fugue for keyboard, which is even trickier to play. It is based on the notes in German notes B A C H (B flat, A C B), as in the last movement of the Art of Fugue.

Amongst my favourite interpreters of the prelude and fugues by Bach are pianists Andras Schiff and Tatiana Nicolaeva, also my counterpoint tutor, Fridrick Muller.

Richard: *Have you ever written a fugue?*

Carlos: Yes, indeed. When I was studying fugues under Fridrich Muller, who was very beautiful to work with. It is very difficult, but also-very absorbing and engaging.

Richard: *Carlos, one final question if I may. The description of the structure of a fugue can make it sound like a mathematical formula. How does a formula make pleasing music?*

Carlos: That is the most difficult question to answer. Thank you for saving it to the end!

I think there is no direct answer. Composers write what is in their heart and in their head. Many dedicate their work to the Almighty, others to their Patron, others to someone close to them. This dedication makes them want to do their best and to present the best that they can do.

Maybe I should finish by repeating part of my answer to your first question: the intellectual challenge involved in writing a fugue demands using techniques combining science and art that perhaps represents one of the most sophisticated achievements of human thinking in musical terms.

Richard: *Carlos, thank you so much for sharing your insights into fugues with members of the Choir. Singing a fugue under your direction will mean so much more to us in future.*