



● *Elective Solitude Recordings*

J.S. BACH *The Art of Fugue*
Diana Boyle, piano

J.S. BACH | *The Art of Fugue*

When we think of fugue, we think of Bach. It was perhaps his favourite musical form. He wrote fugues throughout his career, but his interest in them achieved its most elaborate and sublime expression in *The Art of Fugue*, a work which remained unfinished at his death.

Fugue is a particularly abstract musical form. This may contribute to a general notion about fugues that they are rather dry and academic – at the geeky end of musical composition. If Bach had not championed fugue and made it so superbly his own, perhaps this is the way we would have come to think of it.

Bach was alert to the propensity of fugue to academicism, criticising the work of contemporary fugue writers for failing to rise above the merely correct and methodical. His own fugues are never pedantic or academic. Even so, they still tend to be regarded as belonging at the more austere end of his output. This is particularly true of *The Art of Fugue*. Its reputation as one of the highest pinnacles of Western musical achievement has not brought it closer to the listening public. High tends to mean difficult to reach, if not remote, possibly cold and even dangerous. Only the toughest and most knowledgeable climbers attempt to scale the highest peaks. *The Art of Fugue* is more revered than listened to.

The cerebral nature of *The Art of Fugue* is indisputable. Bach wrote it not with a view to performance, but as an exploratory and exemplary exercise in the pure science of music. But the greatness of *The Art of Fugue* lies precisely in its refusal to acknowledge a division between abstraction and intellect on the one hand, and expression and emotion on the other. Indeed, we could say that here, as so often in his work, Bach takes us beyond the dualism of mind and body – the intellectual is revealed by the emotional, and the emotional resides in and through the intellectual. Nor should we forget the sensuous dimension – the way the music sounds when played. For though Bach does not specify which instrument or instruments *The Art of Fugue* is to be played on, it offers the performer rich opportunities for colouring in sound, especially when it is played on the piano.

In speaking about *The Art of Fugue*, Diana Boyle stresses the 'orchestral' dimensions of the work. 'This is not piano music', she says in a recent interview, and goes on to explain that when she plays Bach she is often thinking of the violin, not least in the variety of articulations which the violin is capable of. Bach's 'instrumentation' of this profoundly intellectual work can at times, she says, suggest Brahms (the entry of the third voice in Contrapunctus VIII, for example), sometimes even Wagner ('trombone and double bass' at bar 45 of Contrapunctus XII, Inversus) and, in Contrapunctus VII, a flute playing Debussy ('It's so delicate...the sound has to float').

Bach conceived *The Art of Fugue* not just as a collection of fugues illustrating different possibilities of the form, but as a large-scale structure built from a progression of fugues unified by strong tonal and thematic relationships. *The Art of Fugue* is the result of what one might call a research experiment: the exploration to the limits of its potential of a simple four bar subject in D minor. Bach develops this material over fourteen long fugues and four canons*. Although the precise sequence of these pieces is disputed, they are generally arranged in order of increasing complexity.

Bach completed the first draft of *The Art of Fugue* in 1742, revising and adding to it over the next seven years. At his death in July 1750 the work was found to be incomplete: the manuscript of the final fugue ('Contrapunctus', in Bach's terminology) gives out at bar 239, before the final reappearance of the main Art of Fugue subject. This led Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach to conclude that his father had died in mid composition – that *The Art of Fugue* had quite literally been cut off by death. Later commentators have wondered whether there might have been another page which got lost. But recent scholarship has shown neither account of the unfinished manuscript to be correct. The evidence suggests rather that Bach stopped work on *The Art of Fugue* in the Autumn of 1749 before the deterioration in his sight made it no longer possible for him to work; and, since there are usable empty staves on the last extant page of the manuscript, the notion that Bach completed the fugue on another piece of paper seems implausible.

*The canons are omitted in this performance.

Bach would certainly have drafted out the full scheme of this supremely complex fugue before working it through in detail, and it has long been known that the foundational thematic subject of *The Art of Fugue* can successfully be integrated with the existing material of Contrapunctus XIV, suggesting that this is what Bach had in mind. Of the several attempts to complete the fugue, in modern times, that of Donald Francis Tovey is probably the most successful and the most frequently used.

Performances of Contrapunctus XIV (such as this one by Diana Boyle) that do not use any of the 'completed' versions, stopping instead where Bach's own notes run out, have a particular expressive power. The sense of rupture brought about in the listener by a piece of music that literally breaks off in mid sentence is too shocking to be theorised in any satisfactory way. We follow music in our heads, and if it suddenly stops, we experience a kind of miniature mental trauma as we topple into emptiness.

All music exists in relation to silence, but the silence that precedes and comes after a completed work is connected to the music, anticipating meaning or reverberating with it. The silence that follows a piece of music which is broken off, is quite different – unstructured, perturbing, even desolate. By analogy, it tells us that there is no such thing as a completed life; that all lives end in mid sentence; that we live and then, from one moment to the next, we stop living, and that even the greatest among us – even Bach – cannot escape this inexorable truth. At the same time, the breaking off of the last fugue in Bach's *Art of Fugue* speaks symbolically of the fact that we can know nothing of what comes after life, and that all we can do is to keep living, producing and creating, as Bach did, right up to the end.

The suddenness of the ending of Contrapunctus XIV is especially affecting, because it truncates music whose inner purpose is so much to do with the working through and completing of an elaborate hierarchy of complex patterns. Moreover, it seems entirely fitting that Bach's working life should symbolically come to an end in the middle of a fugue, since fugue was the musical form that more than any other he made his own and with which we so strongly associate his name as a composer.

J. S Bach's unfinished last fugue from The Art of Fugue



Recorded at Forde Abbey, Chard, Dorset, 26-31 March 2007 on a Grotrian Steinweg model 225 (C.1990).

Piano: Diana Boyle

Sound Engineer: Brad Michel

Piano Technician: Michel Brandjes

Design: Pia Östlund

Photographs of Forde Abbey © Charlie Hopkinson

Other recordings by Diana Boyle and more information can be found at www.dianaboyle.com

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Diana Boyle | *Biographical notes*

Diana Boyle was born in London and educated at St Paul's Girls' school and as a Foundation Scholar at the Royal College of Music. In 1970 she continued her studies under Enrique Barenboim in Tel Aviv, and in 1973 was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study with Artur Balsam in New York. Balsam's profound musical insight into the classical and chamber music repertoire, and his friendship and encouragement until his death in 1994, proved to be the pivotal influence on Diana's own musical life.

After making her London recital debut in 1979 she gave concerts in the USA, Canada, Spain, Portugal and England. She also taught piano and chamber music in London and in the USA. In 1987, Diana was invited to make a series of recordings for National Public Radio in Boston. This included performances of the Bach Partitas, the late Schubert Sonatas, and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* (this recording was subsequently released on CD by Centaur Records USA in 1989). In 1990 Diana returned to the Bach Partitas, recording this time at Forde Abbey in Dorset, England, for Integra Records. She followed this with recordings of late piano works by Brahms (1994, Integra), Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 2 (2000 MSV) and Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (2003 ESR).

Her love of the entire recording process, with its sense of solitude – the music made in privacy and surrounded by silence – and her willingness to take responsibility for all the editing decisions (with the meticulous technical support and loyalty of Brad Michel, her sound engineer), has enabled Diana Boyle to explore these extraordinary musical masterpieces in depth during the last twenty years.

In 2001, Diana Boyle moved from London to Southern Portugal. She is currently working on the complete Mozart piano sonatas.

www.dianaboyle.com

J.S. BACH *The Art of Fugue* BWV 1080

CD I	1. Contrapunctus I	4'23
	2. Contrapunctus II	3'48
	3. Contrapunctus III	4'32
	4. Contrapunctus IV	4'45
	5. Contrapunctus V	5'26
	6. Contrapunctus VI	5'10
	7. Contrapunctus VII	7'02
	8. Contrapunctus VIII	8'00
	9. Contrapunctus IX	3'39

Total playing time 46:47

CD II	1. Contrapunctus X	6'48
	2. Contrapunctus XI	7'20
	3. Contrapunctus XII rectus	6'03
	4. Contrapunctus XII inversus	5'49
	5. Contrapunctus XIII rectus	2'57
	6. Contrapunctus XIII inversus	2'52
	7. Contrapunctus XIV unfinished	12'08

Total playing time 44:00

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