Johann Sebastian Bach

The Art of Fugue
BWV 1080

James Johnstone

harpsichord

METRONOME
www.metronome.co.uk

Johann Sebastian Bach

The Art of Fugue BWV 1080

James Johnstone harpsichord

METRONOME

Second harpsichord	Carole Cerasi (CD 2, tracks 1-2, 10-11)
Executive Producer	Tim Smithies
Recording Producer	Carole Cerasi, Vincent Ranger (CD 2, tracks 1-2, 10-11)
Recording Engineer & Editor	John Taylor
Photographs	James Johnstone
Harpsichord	Stephan Geiger, 1995, after Johann Christoph Österlein, 1792, Berlin
Second harpsichord	John Phillips, 2007, after Johann Heinrich Gräbner (the elder), 1722 – kindly lent by Trevor Pinnock
Organ	Christoph Treutmann, 1737, Grauhof
Harpsichord tuning & temperament	Edmund Pickering
Recording venues	Weston Parish Church, Hertfordshire, UK Stiftskirche St. Georg, Grauhof, Germany
Recording dates	Oct 2 2017 (organ), Dec 11-12 2019, Mar 3-5 2020, Jul 10 2022

With special thanks to Jill Severs for decades of invaluable guidance, and to Olaf Reimers for his thoughtful insights

Contrapunctus 1
Contrapunctus 2
Contrapunctus 3
Contrapunctus 4
Contrapunctus 5
Contrapunctus 6
Contrapunctus 7
Contrapunctus 8
Contrapunctus 9
Contrapunctus 10
Contrapunctus 11
Contrapunctus 12 inversus a 4
Contrapunctus 12 (rectus) a 4
Contrapunctus 13 (rectus) a 3
Contrapunctus 13 (inversus) a 3
Contrapunctus 10a a 4
Canon per Augmentationem in Contrario Motu
Canon alla Ottava
Canon alla Decima in Contrapunto alla Terza
Canon alla Duodecima in Contrapunto alla Quinta
Fuga a 2 Claviers (inversus)
Fuga a 2 Claviers alio modo (rectus)
Fuga a 3 Soggetti
Choral Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten

Unlike the few contemporaneous publications of Bach's music, *The Art of Fugue* appears to have a more complex history that poses more questions than answers. This short overview aims to prelude a new concept of performing the music as it has come down to us. Doing so acknowledges that, despite problems to be discussed, *The Art of Fugue* gives us a glimpse of the logic Bach portrayed in other large-scale compositions–vocal and instrumental–and how Bach's family perceived his work. It also gives us room to speculate on the type of publication Bach envisaged had he survived long enough to see his work through.

Although *The Art of Fugue* (*Die Kunst der Fuge,* BWV 1080) was not published until after Bach's death, a version from *c.* 1742 titled *Die Kunst der Fuga* exists in Berlin in a fair copy in Bach's hand. Compared with the more commonly known collection, it was a modest assembly of three simple fugues, three counter-fugues (in which the first answer is presented as the inverse of the subject), two double and triple fugues, and two canons. Bach was, however, a habitual revisor. For example, the holograph of *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* shows four distinct phases: the first was completed in 1722, but over the years, minor revisions transformed the pieces into those we know today. While *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* did not find its way into print until 1801, preparation for *The Art of Fugue* was underway at the time of Bach's death, a project that would only be brought to fruition by his sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach in 1751. It is conjectured that had Bach lived to see its publication, the final version might have been different to the one we know. Most significantly, its last fugue might have reached us in a finished state, the order of the later movements organised differently, and the chorale prelude *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein* might have been excluded. In addition, revisions Bach undertook while the engraver was at work, especially in Contrapunctus 6, would have been incorporated into the edition.

The Art of Fugue might be seen as the culmination of a period in which Bach became almost solely preoccupied with canonic and fugal polyphony. 1742 saw the publication of the so-called *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988), which contains nine strict canons, and two further collections came in 1747: *The Musical Offering* (BWV 1079) also comprises canons in varying forms, as well as two *ricercari*; in addition are the canonic variations on the hymn *Vom Himmel hoch da komm' ich her* (BWV 769). Thus, *The Art of Fugue* is not unique to Bach's contrapuntal experiments of this period. Its impetus might have been Johann Mattheson's *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739) which lists many of the species of counterpoint found in Angelo Berardi's *Documenti armonici* (1687). Bach may have seen a draft of Mattheson's publication as early as 1738, and it is probably in response to a challenge by Mattheson for Bach to write three-subject fugues that provided the stimulus for *The Art of Fugue's* composition. However, this does not necessarily mean that we should owe a debt of gratitude to Mattheson since the subject of Contrapunctus 14 has been traced to Berardi. Meanwhile, it is absent in Mattheson's publication.

Regardless of Mattheson's influence, it is probable that the expansion of the 1742 version of *Die Kunst der Fuga* into the one recorded here is due to Bach's affiliation to the *Korrespondierenden Sozietät der Musicalischen Wissenschaften* (Mizler Society). It required of its members an annual publication of a dissertation or musical work. Bach's first submission was the *Canon Triplex* (BWV 1076), which he supplemented with the *Canonic Variations*, and, in the following year, *The Musical Offering*. *The Art of Fugue* was probably to be his final contribution since members of the society over 65 were exempt from further submissions. This suggests that the work was advanced ahead of the society's deadline of June 1749. However, the first imprint, with its final fugue still unfinished when Bach died the following year, was not published until 1751. A second release followed in 1752, and while its contents were left untouched, the original title page and *nach-richt* were replaced with a freshly printed title and a forward by the renowned theorist Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg.

The music is written as an open score, with each voice designated a unique stave. Four-stave scores were not unusual for Bach, as demonstrated by the two *ricercari* in *The Musical Offering* and the *Canonic Variations*. The format chosen may be explained by prototypes such as those printed by Girolamo Frescobaldi (Rome, 1635) and François Roberday (Paris, 1660) and in the *quatuors* found in French organ books, which Bach is known to have copied. However, the *Canonic Variations* were a submission for the Mizler Society, which, in this instance, probably accounts for the open-score format, which would be perceived to be more scientific. Whether or not Bach worked out these compositions on four staves cannot be said, though autographs of *The Art of Fugue* suggest drafts were restricted to two.

The format Bach chose has led several commentators to propose that *The Art of Fugue* is an ensemble rather than a keyboard work. However, the arrangement of the fugues' strands makes them unsuitable for anything other than performance at the keyboard. There is also room for conjecture that, as a submission to a society that fostered the musical sciences, *The Art of Fugue* might not have been intended even for the keyboard but was, instead, a paradigm of contrapuntal technique for the purposes of study. This would explain the format, which was considered archaic even by the day's standards. However, as a medium for studying fugue and progressive permutations of a single motto subject, the arrangement fits the narrative precisely.

Several problems arising from the publication need addressing. The first concerns the running order of the pieces. Two versions of Contrapunctus 10 were included, though one is a revision of the other. After this point, things become somewhat haphazard. Contrapunctus 11 is the last to be numbered, and if we go by the manuscript version for two harpsichords, the order of the *rectus and inversus* fugues that make up Contrapunctus 12 appears to be wrong. Contrapunctus 14 also seems out of place since, rather than crowning the previous thirteen fugues, it was printed after the canons and was left incomplete. A note on the verso side of the title page of the first edition acknowledges its state. It adds that the chorale prelude *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein*, which Bach is reputed to have dictated on his deathbed, was printed as a means of compensation. We should be cautious about this. *The Art of Fugue* was not published until eleven months after Bach's death, indicating no rush to print. Even considering the months it took to draw up an inventory of his chattels, CPE or JCF Bach had enough time to complete the fugue rather than supplement the collection with a chorale prelude. It is also likely that, during this period, they would have addressed other anomalies concerning the order of the final fugues.

While this might suggest a lack of involvement—if not disinterest—on the part of Bach's heirs, other possibilities remain. The ordering of Contrapunctus 12 might be by design to include four fugues with a structural mirror (inversus—rectus / rectus—inversus), the inverted motto theme following its rectus form in Contrapunctus 11 — a pattern set up since Contrapunctus 8, and the position of the crowning Contrapunctus 14 might also have been part of the plan, providing an unfinished model for those, having studied the various species of fugue, to complete themselves. Such a scenario would not be out of place if the publication were to fulfil either or both of the Mizler Society's requirements. The same logic might also be applied to the chorale prelude, which takes the form of a carefully crafted exposition of a counter-fugue. As such, it might be seen as a cumulation of the techniques demonstrated earlier in the book and not the compensatory piece the preface suggests. If so, it would have been part of Bach's overall design for the work. (This was not the first time a Bach collection concluded with a seemingly unrelated work. Precedence exists in the *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988), where the final variation is based on several popular songs woven around the aria's bass.) Thus, it could be that the collection we know was intentional and that his sons' understanding of *The Art of Fugue* was compromised.

There are incongruities other than the sequential placing of the fugues and canons since the titling is anomalous. Bach's use of the Latin nominative 'Contrapunctus' suitably fits the gravitas of the fugues and is probably derived from Buxtehude's *Fried- und freudenreiche Hinfahrt* (BuxWV 76). Three fugues (nos. 6, 7 and 9) also bear Latin descriptors; of the canons, only one in the print version carries a Latin title ('per Augmentationem contrario motu') —a note by JCF Bach indicates this to be his father's devising. The manuscript of another canon titled 'Canon in hypodiapason' has been translated to 'Canon all Ottava' for the print version. The Italian descriptions were probably the work of CPE and JCF Bach, who generally added Italian titles to their compositions. Contrapunctus 14 is similarly intriguing since it bears no title in the manuscript, though the description of 'Fuga a 3 soggetti' appears in the imprint, implying a fourth voice was not planned. Among others, Philipp Spitta

suggested that since the title indicates a three- rather than the expected four-part fugue, it should not be considered part of the collection. Certainly, it does not follow the paradigm of the remaining fugues, where the motto subject always returns before a similar juncture to the one where Contrapunctus 14 concludes. However, Spitta does not consider that the titling of Contrapunctus 14 merely describes the fugue his sons found. He also fails to consider that modesty would probably have dictated that the third exposition, based on the letters B-A-C-H, would not be the last. As the final fugue, a subject reintroducing the motto theme might have been more appropriate.

Such anomalies demonstrate that, at some level, Bach's sons were responsible for getting *The Art of Fugue* to print. However, the extent of their involvement needs scrutiny. Despite including the two versions of Contrapunctus 10, the running order of the first twelve fugues is correct since they demonstrate a motific hierarchy and the type of logic seen in the 1742 *Die Kunst der Fuga*. It is only with the mistaken inclusion of the earlier version of Contrapunctus 10 and the ordering of the fugues from no. 12 onwards that things become confused, which probably pinpoints the moment their involvement began. However, this seems to have been minimal.

Such a scenario would explain why the book was printed in the first place. Neither title page bears the publisher's name, which suggests *The Art of Fugue* was a self-published affair, and the costs of the engraver and printer would need to be met. Research remains to be done on engravers' fees in eighteenth-century Saxony, though we know from French records of the *Régime Ancienne* that prices as high as four *livres* ten *sols* (*c.* three Saxon florins) per plate were not unusual. Considering that the annual stipend of a pastor in Saxony in 1750 was 175 florins, the cost of engraving a 67-page book before printing would have presented a considerable financial barrier. Indeed, engraving and printing from scratch would probably have been perceived as foolhardy: the style of the fugues was, by 1750, considered anachronistic (a point to which Marpurg alludes in his preface to the 1752 version), and it is doubtful its contents would have interested any outside the arena for which it was composed. However, additional costs would have been minimised had the plates been engraved and ready for the press. Since the deadline for submission was June 1749, we must assume that the book was in such an advanced stage of development that CPE and JCF Bach's primary responsibility was to assemble the collection and have it printed.

How *The Art of Fugue* was received is a matter of speculation, though it is doubtful many copies were produced. Printers' usual practice was to produce no more than ten to twenty copies of a book at any one time. Even when using copper rather than the cheaper tin plates, the damage caused by the printing press ensured that engravings were unfit for purpose after *c.* 100 impressions. This limits the total number that would have been circulated, and, given the re-release of 1752, it is doubtful that many were sold. Indeed, we may conjecture that all the copies from 1752 were remnants of the first print run since comparisons between existing copies of the two versions demonstrate no variances in print quality. Furthermore, we should also question the necessity of repackaging the book with a new preface by a respected theorist unless the initial publication was unsuccessful.

This does not belie the impact *The Art of Fugue* had on subsequent generations of musicians. Surviving manuscripts after 1752 demonstrate that students and composers made full or partial copies of the cycle. In addition, in 1802—nearly three decades before Mendelssohn's first Bach 'revival' concerts—the Zurich-based publisher Hans Georg Nägeli released his own edition of *The Art of Fugue*. It was an ambitious publication since the music is presented in open score with an additional keyboard reduction on the same page. All is complete except for the chorale prelude and the final seven bars of Contrapunctus 14 (Nägeli prefers to finish the work with the A major cadence and omit the beginning of the final exposition). Judging by the dissemination of some 30 remaining copies of Nägeli's publication, it must have reached a substantially large audience. Future generations of musicians would take on the mantle and complete the final fugue. However, as demonstrated in this recording, its incompleteness is a poignant reminder that—supposition aside—Bach's death deprived us of the work he envisaged.

TABLE
Movement Numbering

BWV	Autograph 1742	Print 1751
1080,1	1	Contrapunctus 1
1080,2	3	Contrapunctus 2
1080,3	2	Contrapunctus 3
1080,4	—	Contrapunctus 4
1080,5	4	Contrapunctus 5
1080,6	7	Contrapunctus 6
1080,7	8	Contrapunctus 7
1080,8	10	Contrapunctus 8
1080,9	5	Contrapunctus 9
1080,10	—	Contrapunctus 10
1080,11	11	Contrapunctus 11
1080,12,2,1	13	Contrapunctus 12 inversus a 4
	13	Contrapunctus 12 (rectus) a 4
1080,13,2,1	14	Contrapunctus 13 (rectus) a 3
	14	Contrapunctus 13 inversus a 3
1080,10a	6	Contrapunctus 10a a 4
1080,14	12,15 supplement	Canon per Augmentationem in Contrario Motu
1080,15	9	Canon alla Ottava
1080,16	—	Canon alla Decima in Contrapunto alla Terza
1080,17	—	Canon alla Duodecima in Contrapunto alla Quinta
1080,18,1,2	supplement	Fuga a 2 Claviers (inversus) Fuga a 2 Claviers alio modo (rectus)
1080,19	supplement	Fuga a 3 Soggetti (Contrapunctus14)
668a	—	Choral Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten

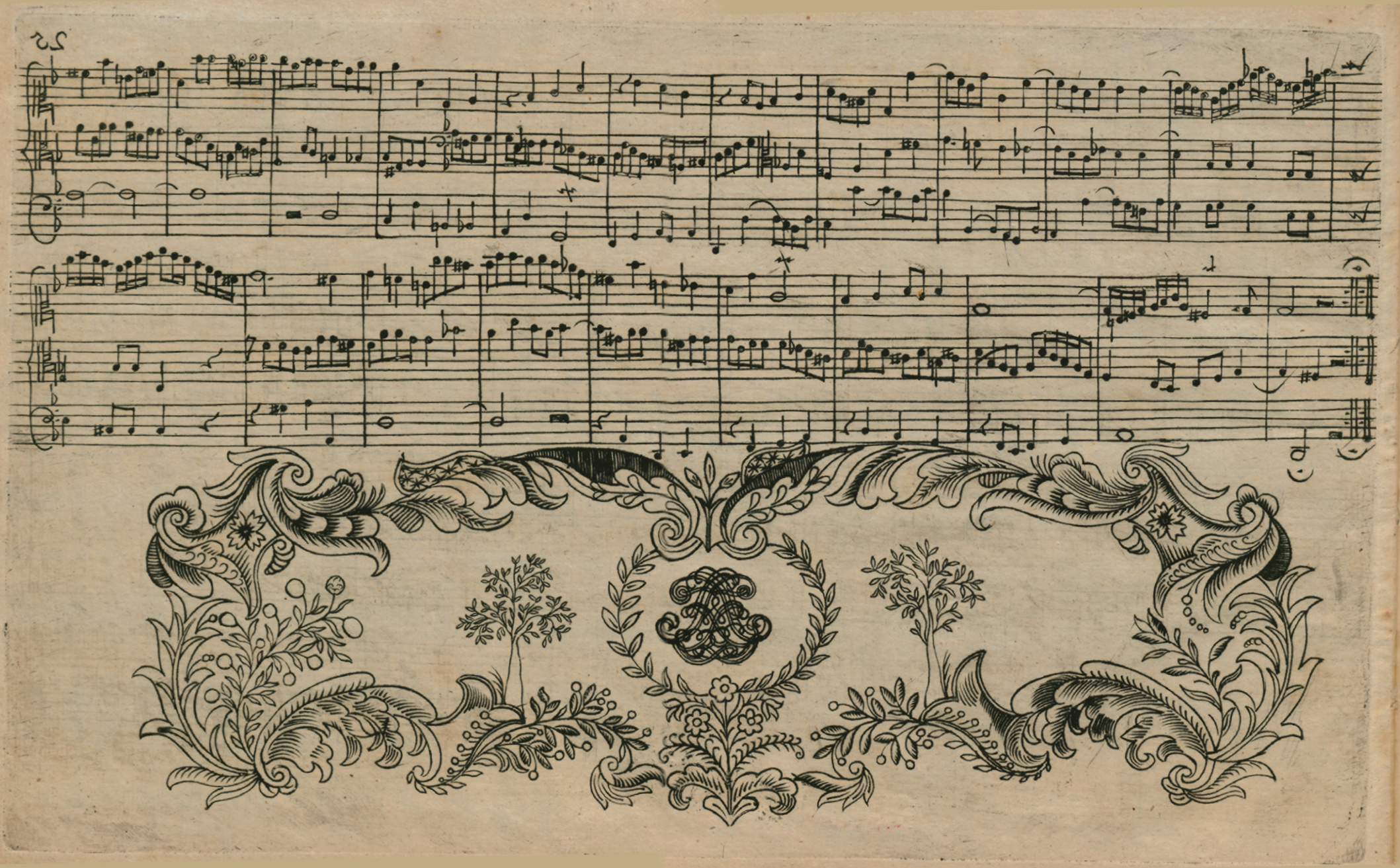
A Personal Note

My first acquaintance with the Art of Fugue came through the Swiss organist Lionel Rogg's admirable 1969 recording, purchased in my teenage years. Whilst fascinated by the work itself, the organ as medium never felt right to me, even less so having encountered Dutch harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt's essay 'The Art of Fugue: Bach's Last Harpsichord Work; an Argument' where he convincingly proposed that Bach had deliberately limited himself to the possibilities of ten fingers. Some 45-odd years later, with some Covid-related delays, I am now adding my own musical thoughts to an already crowded catalogue of recorded performances.

Whilst Bach's Art of Fugue invites polemics around questions of instrument, text and order, to name but a few, my approach is a simple one. For perhaps the first time in recording history I present here the 1751/2 posthumous print in its entirety. This single-minded approach has the benefit for the performer/listener of eschewing textual problems. Included are the early version of Contrapunctus10 (10a), which highlights some intriguing working practice, and the chorale for organ, Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten BWV 668a, added by Carl Philipp Emanuel as 'compensation for the lack of completion of the Fuga a 3 Soggetti'. This last fugue is terminated at a dominant chord, seven bars short of the autograph manuscript.

Many listeners take pleasure in recognising the intricacies of Bach's contrapuntal skills, and yet this is only one aspect of the listening experience. Paradoxically, when Bach worked within self-imposed parameters he produced some of his most moving music. The form might be austere but the music travels through an extraordinary emotional and spiritual landscape, and like all Bach's late works both expands the 'last word' in the idiom and provides continuous refreshment for the spirit.

The harpsichord I have chosen, built by the German maker Stephan Geiger, is based on an instrument by Johann Christoph Österlein, now residing in the Musikinstrumenten-Museum, Berlin. Despite its late date (1792) it shares significant characteristics with the instruments from Michael Mietke's workshop, with which Bach was familiar, and its clear tone seems an ideal tool for Bach's contrapuntal textures. The temperament was devised by Edmund Pickering in the spirit of historical circulating unequal temperaments.



1751 print: Contrapunctus 8

JAMES JOHNSTONE

James Johnstone enjoys a varied musical life as harpsichordist and organist, working mainly within the period instrument world. Following studies in London and Holland with Jill Severs and Ton Koopman respectively, James has forged a career as recitalist, chamber musician, continuo player and teacher. As a recitalist he has performed throughout Europe and in North and South America. He is professor of Early Keyboards at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, the Royal Academy of Music and Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance.
James is currently recording Bach's organ works for Metronome.

www.jamesjohnstone.org