

Fugue No. 8

D-Sharp minor (E-Flat minor)
Well-Tempered Clavier Book I
Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 8, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

Religion teaches us that in paradise the lamb will lie
down with the lion and we shall live in harmony.
(Ivan - *Brothers Karamazov*)

A fugue is like a classic novel--a long one. The author has not rushed his setting of the stage and now introduces the main characters. As the plot unfolds, in motives prompting each player to behave in certain ways, we recognize ourselves.

By way of analogy, the main character of a fugue is its subject. This subject, so similar in its demeanor to that of *Die Kunst der Fuge*, befits one of the more reflective moments in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

An aura of solemn expectation is established in the five-semitone lament and Phrygian half cadence terminating the exposition. As we saw in the c-sharp minor fugue, this mannerism can be associated with Christ's passion. In this analysis I'll compare the fugue to Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, also permeated with themes of suffering and the Gospels.

In its first development we encounter the subject again eight times, once in canon at the octave. Our subject has revealed its shadow, an identical twin. The plot thickens with the six measures of dense stretto concluding the first episode. We begin to feel a depth to this character enticing us to read on.

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Dimitri, the eldest of the Karamazovs, accepts punishment for the murder of his father. He is innocent. His brother Ivan cannot reconcile the existence of a loving God with injustice and pain. Ivan is especially troubled by the suffering of children: "If everyone must suffer in order to buy eternal harmony, what do children have to do with it? Why do they get thrown on the pile, to manure someone's future harmony with themselves?"

Ivan proceeds to indict organized religion (and by implication all totalitarian systems) by reciting a legend in which Christ returns to earth and the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor of Seville accuses Him of heresy. His crime? Preaching freedom--what Christians call the *Gospel*.

But the Inquisitor subverts the Gospel by implying that unfettered freedom leads only to anarchy. He accuses Christ of preaching a radical notion of freedom that humans are not equipped to understand or practice. This freedom, argues the Inquisitor, requires self restraint--a voluntary obedience to rules. But what rules and by whom? If there can be no agreement, then tyrants must arise to create and enforce them. Religion (Ivan implies) is such a tyrant.

In this manner Dostoevsky infuses the novel with a profound conflict. The purpose of the writing then becomes to resolve this conflict in ways that will convince the reader that the burning questions of our existence indeed have answers.

The fugue, too, is about conflict resolution. The techniques that Bach employs--harmony and counterpoint--are analogous to how we resolve our own enduring questions, and listening to a fugue is analogous to life.

Our premonition of conflict in this fugue is realized in its second episode where the subject's world is literally turned upside down. The twin is reintroduced, this time in contrary motion. Rhythmic deviations augment the probability of a more prolonged development.

Preceding the third episode's one coherent statement, the subject is developed as an unfinished and contradictory being. As in the novel, where Dostoevsky compels Ivan to acknowledge the contradictions of his secret impulses, Bach has juxtaposed incomplete statements of the subject in contrary motion. With Bach, such oppositions represent the conflict, and seeming contradiction, of the cross: "If anyone would come after me [Jesus], he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23-24).

Alyosha Karamazov, the youngest of the three brothers, is a novice in the religious order of the Elder Zosima. Alyosha recounts, years after the Elder's death, the life and teachings of his mentor. Although the Zosima narrative is not addressed to Ivan, it answers (for the reader at least) the Inquisitor's distortion of the Gospel point for point.

Zosima has a true understanding of freedom. It is a freedom from the tyranny of pride and ambition. It is a freedom from selfishness and sin. It is the freedom to love what is pure and to be thankful for the gift of life, Holy Scripture, and the joys of nature. It is a freedom of grace and mercy that the common Russian *especially children* can understand. It is a freedom to turn away from what hurts

one's self and others, and to choose what flowers in redemption and healing instead.

This fugue demonstrates the freedom of which the Elder Zosima speaks. Bach has composed not anything, but counterpoint that is original, harmonious, well-proportioned, fitting, vital, and what will stand the test of time. His freedom emanates from knowledge; he shuns what is *not* original, *not* harmonious, *not* well-proportioned, *not* fitting or vital, and what will *not* stand the test of time. He is free to reject these because of experience; he is well trained, skillful, and disciplined--but above all, disciplined. Bach understands that, while freedom may allow, it does not reward anarchy and childish experimentation.

So the final episode of Bach's fugue is a twisting journey of character transformation and growth that resolves the conflict of prior episodes. For the first time, the subject is heard in stretto with its melodic inversion (m. 64). As in the novel, where the Karamazovs are changed by swirling circumstance, Bach's fugue is transformed by rhythmic augmentation of its subject in each of its three voices: bass (m. 62), alto (m. 67), and soprano (m. 77).

Toward the conclusion of the fugue and novel we are able to hear the final word of each character with a keen awareness that he is not what we had imagined him to be at the beginning.

Now you may ask what was the point of the analogy? I shall tell you the point by first telling you what it was not. It was not my intention to suggest that this fugue is allegorical of the brothers Karamazov. How could it be? Dostoevsky's novel did not exist when this fugue was written.

It was my intention rather to affirm the principle that a fugue, like a novel, requires time to unfold. You must give it time--lots of time. Dostoevsky is not read in a day, nor is a Bach fugue assimilated in hyperlinked sound bites. These are provided as an aid of course, but a rightful appreciation comes after listening many times--start to finish.

The fugue must be given time to create its own world, set its own stage, introduce its subject simply and beautifully, reiterate it sufficiently to be remembered and effect its various transformations. Should you listen to this fugue every day for the next month you will only have begun to hear the exquisite beauty of its ingenious counterpoint and the logic of its tonal architecture.

My second purpose was to illustrate how the composer, like the author, introduces gaps that are deliberately unresolved. The creator may hint at solutions or imply intersections, but he may just as well (as Dostoevsky often does) leave us to resolve them for ourselves. The purpose is to prompt further development in order that we may compose a satisfactory resolution in our own minds.

The radical transformation of this fugue's second episode would have been lost without its exposition and first episode. Its motion would not have been perceived as contrary if there had been no pattern for it to disrupt. Then having introduced seven consecutive inversions of the subject, the fugue could not possibly have concluded after its second episode. The conflicted third episode only delays the resolution of antithetical elements that are finally synthesized in the pensive augmentations and stretti of the fourth.

My third hope was to reiterate the principle that *polyphonic* music (of which fugue is the highest expression) achieves its effect by means of *independent voices*. Mikhail Bakhtin's designation of Dostoevsky as the father of the *polyphonic* novel is therefore revealing of both the writer's craft and fugal process. Fiction prior to Dostoevsky is now said to have been *monophonic*; the voices of each character were subsumed beneath the author's. But in Dostoevsky the character's voices became independent; they began to interact on an even plane with themselves and the author, and the plot came to serve their autonomous opinions and dialogues.

Finally, I wished to illustrate how both fugue and novel contain nested layers of narratives. Ivan's *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* is a subplot. Alyosha's retrospective on the *Life of the Hieromonk and Elder Zosima* is especially complex. Like one of those cupcaked Russian dolls, it contains stories within stories within stories. The fugue's counterpart to layered narratives involves tonal architecture. This fugue is in e-flat but it contains nested cells in b-flat, G-flat, a-flat, and C-flat. These episodes are connected by the logic of tonality. If you wish to pursue this aspect further study the A-flat Major fugue of Book I.

Although Bach and Dostoevsky were separated by culture and time, their art addresses the same intractable problems. Both men agonized over the loss of young children. Dostoevsky's three-year old Aleksey was memorialized in the saintly Alyosha Karamazov. While Bach did not write of his many losses, his music expresses it all.

Baroque word painting represents a technical subtext barely audible to the modern ear. To those who are familiar with its conventions, this is a religious fugue in the tradition of Buxtehude, or Bach's Leipzig predecessor, Johann Kuhnau. From its first lament, through its wrenching diminished thirds (m. 56 & m. 72) elsewhere sung to the word *crucifixus* ([B-Minor Mass](#)), to the reiteration of its lament in mm. 73-74, we form the impression that Bach is expressing something that few writers, even of Dostoevsky's caliber, could say in words.

With both artists the theme is of grace in suffering and in the face of death. With Bach, grace is motivated by the promise of eternal reward--a crown. In keeping with his Lutheran faith, Bach infuses his music with contrasts (conflict) in order that they may be brought into *harmony* with the preeminence of Christ and of his cross. Harmony comes from the conflict even as the crown comes from the cross.

With Dostoevsky grace is more complex. The promise of eternal reward is not enough for Ivan who, in answer to his own question about the suffering of children, exclaims: "I absolutely renounce all higher harmony. It is not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child. They have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket."

From the dissonance of Dostoevsky's polyphony there emerges a harmony consistent with the vexing problems of injustice and pain. Contrasting his brother Ivan's cynicism about eternal reward, the innocent Dimitri cries from his prison cell: "It is impossible for a convict to be without God. From the depths of the earth, we, the men underground, will start singing a tragic hymn to God, in whom

there is joy! Hail to God and his joy! I love him." In other words, the reward may be eternal, but it is also here and now.

The synergy of independent voices turns the imagination figuratively to realities that transcend immediate contexts. The French symbolist Paul Valery described this as a "formal construct or poetic image of great force which constantly recurs in the poet's work as his mind circles around a certain predominant attitude." Thomas Carlyle described it as "concealment and yet revelation...by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there."

This fugue reveals, perhaps more so than any other, a poetic construct constantly recurring in the music of J. S. Bach. It is the construct of countervailing opposites that effect variation while at the same time unifying the work of art. In his canons Bach reveals these oppositions to be symbols of a spiritual mystery--what Lutherans of his day called *paradoxa*.

If one thinks of fugue in these terms, this fugue illustrates how the lion may indeed lie down with the lamb and live in harmony, not just in paradise but here on earth.