

# Fugue No. 8

D-Sharp minor

*Well-Tempered Clavier Book II*

Johann Sebastian Bach

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

In the dm fugue of Book II we considered Bach's understanding of music as rhetoric. Now it is time to recount the hottest rhetorical clash of his career, a collision that moved from:

- Scheibe's invective
- through Mattheson's challenge
- to musical proofs
- filled with meaning
- about the meaning of life

I shall conclude with a short discussion of world-weariness and how Bach coped with criticism and discouragement.

## **Scheibe's Invective**

The young man knows the rules  
but the old man knows the exceptions.  
Oliver Wendell Holmes

The year was 1740 and Johann Sebastian had recently begun to compose another cycle of oddly keyed preludes and fugues. He hoped to prove a

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theoretical point, that a well-tuned clavier could be played in any key--even the d# minor of this fugue. Also of late, he had catalogued the music of his ancestors and compiled a detailed genealogy. At fifty-five he aimed to be remembered well.

But a recent dispute had called into question the legacy that he had hoped to leave. A vindictive twenty-three year old named Scheibe had mocked his music, alleging pompous artificiality, a turgid and confused style, and a lack of natural grace and conviction. While every Leipziger smelled revenge on Scheibe's part (Bach's earlier rejection of him as organist at St. Nicholas was well known), it still hurt.

Most offensive was the personal nature of Scheibe's charge: the elder composer was unschooled in the art of rhetoric and clueless as to its musical applications. How, Scheibe scoffed, could Bach be a good composer if he had, "hardly troubled himself with the rules that are as necessary to music as to oratory and poetry?" Without rhetoric, he asserted, "it is hardly possible to write with feeling and expression."

The bitterness of Scheibe's words must have tempted Johann Sebastian to respond in kind. But words he left to others like his student Mizler, and the Hamburg lawyer Hudemann to whom the appreciative cantor dedicated a canon.

The sternest rebuke was administered by J. A. Birnbaum, professor of rhetoric at Leipzig University. As an amateur clavierist himself, and one who was obviously charmed by Johann Sebastian, Birnbaum determined that Scheibe's conceit needed dressing down. For the next two years he did just that. Shortly before this fugue was written, Birnbaum shut up the impertinent Scheibe with these words:

He [Bach] so perfectly understands what music has in common with rhetorical art that he is listened to with the utmost satisfaction and pleasure when he discourses on the similarity and agreement between them, and is greatly admired for the skillful use he makes of it in his works.

The renown of this debate was such that Kirnberger, forty years later, could not resist a passing snipe, while Mattheson was careful to distinguish his assessment of Bach's work from that of the now repentant Scheibe. Likewise inspired was Marpurg's observation that the power of Bach's music had less to do with learned counterpoint than with masterful declamation (i.e. rhetoric).

### **Through Mattheson's Challenge**

Also hovering over the creation of the *WTC* Book II was Johann Mattheson, an acerbic critic and theorist who had a habit of running for a pen every time a thought swam through his head. Mattheson's influence was more constructive than Scheibe's, though not without its own blend of admiration with jealousy.

Two decades before this fugue was written Mattheson had censured J. M. Bach, Johann Sebastian's father-in-law, implying that he was ignorant of the

French style. Bach never forgot it. So when Mattheson invited him to contribute his biography to a soon-to-be-published "Triumphal Arch" (*Ehrenpforte*) of German composers, Johann Sebastian ignored him.

In spite of the bad start, Bach was influenced by Mattheson's ideas, particularly as they pertained to rhetoric. Mattheson's first influence was to have composed a series of figured-bass exercises in every key. This was the seed that blossomed in Bach's writing of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

A second influence was Mattheson's *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, written while the Scheibe debate was in full swing (1737-'39). The impetus for Bach to compose a second cycle of preludes and fugues was given special urgency for his having seen a draft in 1738.

What might Mattheson's *Capellmeister* have contained to have motivated Bach so? There was a bookish description of fugue and counterpoint as well as a list of rhetorical devices--*loci topici*--that could be applied to music. But it was Mattheson's challenge that really grabbed Bach's attention: write a fugue on three subjects and, if good enough, Mattheson would publish it with a generous sample of his own. Bach eventually wrote that fugue (the  $f\#$  minor of Book II) but never sent it to Mattheson. Instead he found a place for it as the centerpiece of his own cycle.

Mattheson's admiration for Bach, normally thinly veiled, would eventually flower in high praise. As one of the first to purchase the *Art of Fugue*, Mattheson described it as a work that would amaze non-Germans (provided they were smart enough to understand it).

Let every one, whether a German or a foreigner, lay out his Louis d'or on this treasure! Germany is and remains without doubt the true land of organ music and of fugues!

### **To Musical Proofs**

So much for words; Bach chose instead to address Scheibe's invective by responding to Mattheson's challenge. He would write a string of compositions displaying rhetorical know-how at every opportunity. His proof would be in the "putting" of these devices into his music. If Mattheson liked it, so much the better.

Dr. Ledbetter suggests that this fugue, more so than most, reveals Scheibe's accusation to be groundless (pp. 80, 275). He points out how its subject begins with repeated pitches, a referential device from vocal music. The *canzona* rhythm expresses melancholy and meditation--even an aura of depressive concentration (p. 274). Ledbetter cites Pirro (1907), who showed that repeated notes in Bach's texted music represent certain knowledge, fidelity, and submission to divine will (p. 301). So the initial thought of this fugue is one of resignation.

If its head motive is resigned, the subject's tail is about love and yearning portrayed by a halting dotted rhythm known as *suspiratio* (Ledbetter, p. 275). This "sighing" idea is perpetuated by a countersubject (here heard in the high

voice) that applies *gradation*, a technique where the last word of the former clause becomes the first word of latter, implying "extra meaning" (Ledbetter, p. 275).

Ellis (1980) theorized that the relationship between subject and countersubject is crucial to our understanding of this fugue. It is a relationship of paradox: resignation followed by longing. Because these ideas are in counterpoint, the resignation is literally *accompanied* by yearning.

The yearning is intensified by another rhetorical tool, *paronomasia*, that Bach has used to "allude" to the subject by obscuring its tonal clarity. In the exposition, the subject and its answers are always heard on the pitches *do do do ti do re*. The answers (odd-numbered entries) are transpositions of the subject. They are "real," which is to say that they too begin with the tonic pitch, albeit in the key of the dominant (a# minor)

Following the exposition Bach has obscured scale degree functions and keys. The subject alludes to other scale steps, resembling tonal answers outside the exposition. The tonic becomes more ambiguous, and our perception of harmonic contexts unsettled, as transient tonal centers are retrospectively perceived. Most of these "middle entries" can be heard in two ways:

- m. 15: re in g# -- sol in d#
- m. 17: re in F# -- do in g#
- m. 19: re in b -- fa in g#
- m. 21: sol in g# -- do in d#
- m. 24: le in g#
- m. 27: sol in f# -- do in c#
- m. 30: fa in F# -- do in B
- m. 32: sol in g# -- do in d#

The product of this mounting uncertainty is to intensify one's hope for eventual return. It is a longing that can be perceived on two levels: a literal ache for the key of d# and an unambiguous statement of the subject.

This longing is satisfied by m. 40 and m. 43. These measures exemplify the technique of *peroration*, an earnest and forceful declamation of the subject at the conclusion of an oration. Dr. Ledbetter has observed that the first peroration employs *tnesis*, a filling in of pauses with ideas related to the sighing motive, while the second employs *antithesis*, a simultaneous statement of the subject with its inversion (p. 276).

### **Filled with Meaning**

So Bach employed rhetoric in this fugue? So he was a genius? So what! Some people are content to conclude the analysis here: rhetoric has no meaning; Bach's is an "empty rhetoric." He has proved "a rhetorical point."

Joshua Rifkin is a skillful interpreter of early music. In an interview with Bernard D. Sherman, he makes an amazing statement: "Rhetoric has...almost

nothing to do with content and meaning."<sup>2</sup> He concludes that Mattheson's *Capellmeister* is about how a composition ought to have a beginning, middle, and end--and that's all its about. What Mattheson lacked in words for his evolving theory of composition, he borrowed from the venerable field of rhetoric.

What if Rifkin is wrong? What if Bach's rhetoric had *everything* to do with content and meaning? What if his purpose was to persuade and convince--the acknowledged goal of all rhetoric? What benefit could there be to a display of technique without object?

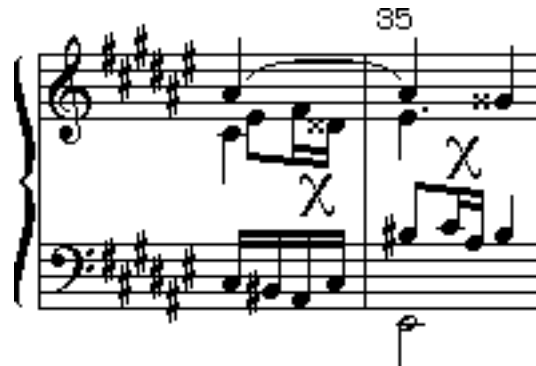
Bach did indeed have an object. He expressed it in the yearning of his countersubject. Notice how this line rises by five semitones: e#, f#, fx, g#, gx, a#. In the c# minor fugue of book I he had used this figure to represent the crown that Christ gives to those who share his suffering.<sup>3</sup>

And what of the repeated notes of the head motive--that figure of resignation? It too was heard in the c# minor fugue. As a matter of fact, it was the third subject of that great work! Would you agree with Pirro's theory that the motive asserts certain knowledge and submission to divine will?

If this fugue is analogous to the c# minor of Book I, there remains another symbol that should be heard in both. Recall that the subject of the former work was the sign of the cross, and that Bach "carried" that cross by repeating it 41 times in 14 iterations of the "Brook motive." In consideration of similarities that appear to exist between the two, one might ask if there are crosses here. The answer is yes; crosses are heard at the end of m. 34 and beginning of m. 35.

(right)

These melodies trace what is known as a *chiastic* contour (after the letter  $\chi$ , first in the Greek spelling of Christ). In his choral music Bach occasionally substituted  $\chi$  for complete renditions of Christ or *Kreuz* ("cross"). Soon I shall recount a famous example where Bach accompanied, as he often did, the word *Kreuz* with a chiastic melody.



But first a word of caution. I am of course aware that finding chiastic symbols in a wordless fugue involves a considerable degree of speculation. Musically, the crosses of this fugue exist to make a strong cadence in the key of the dominant. It is possible that this is their only purpose.

On the other hand there is something too strong, something that attracts more attention to this cadence than it otherwise deserves. It seems to be making a point about itself. So I feel it necessary to recount the story of another composition where Bach employed crosses like these. I am thinking of a composition that has words, for it is in the connection of words with music that I

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<sup>2</sup> The topic of the interview is Rifkin's chapter titled "Re-Inventing Wheels," in Sherman's *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Bach's musical symbol for a crown, read the analysis of the c#m fugue of Book I or the f#m fugue of Book II.

hope to learn something more about the meaning of this fugue.

As you read this story don't conclude that, because Bach applied a musical motive to a word, the same word may be applied willy-nilly to this fugue. By the same token, a cantata motive applied to this fugue would not mean *Hallelujah* in the cantata but "*a pox on you and yours*" in the fugue.

My point is simply this: if word paintings do not have precise meanings, they at least fall within a range of plausible associations. If Bach has used a musical idea to paint the word "cross" in a cantata, that same idea might suggest related meanings when applied to this fugue.

### **About the Meaning of Life**

It is 1724, and the new cantor at St. Thomas church is revising his cantata for Easter Sunday. Bach, thirty-nine years old and in the prime of his life, has recently resigned the employ of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, taken a huge cut in salary, and moved to Leipzig to resume his work as a church musician.

Fifteen years earlier he had composed what future generations would call cantata number four, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, borrowing poetry and melody from Martin Luther. Bach is attracted to Luther's hymn because it comments upon the Epistle that will be read prior to his cantata. He is also drawn to the hymn's structure; each stanza ends, like the medieval sequence it parodies, with a trope--*Hallelujah!*

In the first stanza Luther recounts the death and resurrection of Christ. Bach parses the poetry in fugato diminutions for low voices before assigning the *cantus firmus*, in augmentation, to the sopranos. The stanza concludes: "For this we should rejoice, praise God, give thanks, and sing Hallelujah"; an invitation to which Bach cannot resist but pummel his congregation with 52 Hallelujahs in double time. He can envision his congregation's surprise.

In the second stanza, a duet for sopranos and altos, Luther describes the despair of mankind in the face of death. Bach begins with a didactic elaboration of the first interval in Luther's melody, a descending major second, which he mutates to minor, confident that his congregation will recognize the musical metaphor for death. The mordant writhes from one voice to the other, echoed by reptilian augmented seconds--"Death, Death, Death, Death," hollow and frightening. The somber mood is not broken, even through eight Hallelujahs.

Before proceeding to the third stanza, Bach revisits the fifth, a bass solo: "Jesus is the true Paschal Lamb, which God has offered for us high on the cross's beam" (*Kreuzes Stamm*). In a stunning display of symbols, Bach repeats the word *Kreuzes* three times, attaching his musical symbol for the cross to the second.

Returning to the third stanza, Bach borrows an heroic idiom from the opera, a vigorous motor rhythm for unison strings accompanying his tenors in what promises to be an unadorned rendition of Luther's melody:

Jesus Christ, God's Son,  
has come to take our place

and has removed our sin,  
thus taking from Death  
all his right and strength;  
there remains nothing (*da bleibet nichts*)  
of Death's aura (*Tods Gestalt*);  
he has lost his sting forever.  
Hallelujah!

The composer writes like a painter paints, with lines bold, characters curvaceous, almost feminine; the feathered quill scratching and dancing in cadence with a subterranean melody emanating from somewhere between throat and belly, interrupted only to replenish the supply of ink.

Suddenly the cantor pauses, his hand frozen in midair. *Da bleibet nichts* catches his eye then his imagination. "There remains nothing," yes! Abruptly he scratches out the last bar, inserting the musical equivalent of nothing--rests. Silence! For a second there's no sound, not even from the heroic strings. He follows this with a startling change of tempo -- Adagio -- very slow. Now in haunting tones he abandons Luther's melody on the words *Tods Gestalt* (death's shape, form, stature, presence--there is no English equivalent). But you must wait until Easter Sunday to understand why Luther's melody is not good enough for "Death's aura."

It is Easter Sunday now. The agitated strings mask the whispering ambiance of a restless congregation--mask, that is, until the silence speaks, dumbfounding those caught open-mouthed and deafening the rest. "Death's aura" is dramatic. Bach's congregation pauses to consider what the cantor could possibly have had in mind.

Then they recognize it; he has imposed a musical sign upon "Death's aura." It is the sign of the cross. Not only do the tenors sing a cross, but one that is preceded and followed by two more in the violins. Ah, they have come to expect this from their new musician; he is not only a fine composer and organist, but also preacher and painter, preaching the place of the skull--Golgotha--and painting its grisly troika.

They understand that by superimposing the crosses upon death Bach has created a trope, prompting them to defy their own fear of death with a settled belief in resurrection, Christ's victory over death, wherefore to demand with Hosea and St. Paul: "Where, O Death, is your victory; where O Death is your sting?"

Resuming Luther's melody, Bach's tenors answer unequivocally: "The sting is lost forever, Hallelujah!" It is a Hallelujah so vociferous as to remind the devout of St. Paul's missive: "And having disarmed the powers he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

## World Weariness

In case you have forgotten what prompted this story, it was to suggest that the musical crosses of this fugue have meaning. They are quite like the crosses that Bach superimposed upon *Kreuzes Stamm* and *Tods Gestalt* of his Easter cantata. When heard in the context of Scheibe's criticism, and Bach's concern for legacy, they yield more than a strong cadence. In such a context the meaning of this fugue is not rhetorical, but Bach's answer to world weariness--what he might have called *Weltschmerz*.

We began by observing that, at the time of this fugue's writing, the fifty-five year old was getting his affairs in order. Now's the time to ask why. Why was he writing the story of his life and that of his ancestors, cataloguing his music and theirs, preparing for the publication of his most important works? Why did Scheibe's criticism come at this particular moment--a good one, it seems, to down a shot of *Weltschmerz*? How do you deal with criticism and discouragement?

Bach's dealt with it by resignation to continue the work that God had given him. He expressed that vocation as a call, "to conduct a well-regulated church music to the honor of God." At this point he realized that sniping with Scheibe would produce only more controversy and stress. So he determined to listen well, then to compose music beyond criticism. His response was to live out one of his favorite quotes: "To write great music, the musician must make his life a great song."

Bach accompanied his resignation with yearning for the fulfillment of God's promise. He believed his motto--*Christus Coronabit Crucigeros*--that Christ would crown those who carried his cross. In times of uncertainty and disappointment, when centeredness was called into question, it was his firm conviction that the center would return, and that by divine providence life's reversals could be made to harmonize with his theme: "Music is an agreeable harmony for the honor of God and the permissible delights of the soul."