

Fugue No. 19

A Major

Well-Tempered Clavier Book II

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 19, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

from the poem "Lost"
by David Wagoner

By trade I am obliged to attend periodic conferences, invariably venued in the bowels of one of America's great cities. In the most recent (I'll not nettle the natives by naming it), fellow conferees sardined themselves in taxis for conveyance to a concert some "blocks" away--even the language of cities lauds wooden conformity. I walked. Through the valley of the shadow of deafening traffic I walked, dodging the speechless humanoids with their perpetually downcast eyes, periodically pausing for prescribed intervals, dutifully heeding the blinking lights and little green men.

Cities, I shuddered, conspire to erase the memory of nature--a monolithic scraping of the sky as if to say: O shafts of light be shadowed here, no farther shall you shine. And to the earth: Be buried now in concrete lest you soil us by the remembrance of dirt (that we are but dust).

In the fifth block I ducked into an alley for a breather, amazed at how a mile of

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sidewalk feels like ten. Scanning the surroundings, quiet now for the little distance from the street, I remarked, eerily to myself, how nothing was natural. All was made, in tireless repetition, for and by machines. What is not machine, the city morphs into, such that even the living start to whir, grind, and spin like gears in some gargantuan transmission.

Then to my back I heard the small voice of a breeze--wind in leaves--and turning with great delight discovered a tree. Planted precisely at the center of a calcified circle, festooned in geometrical symmetries of cast iron and cigarette butts, this living thing I saw museum-like, a grotto, a memorial and genuflection as if to some holy relic long ago profaned. It was not a burning bush, but a voice seemed to emanate nonetheless.

I will not be mocked, it said. I thrive in the knowing of my own sense of rightness in the world. I may be ordered only here to grow, but I reach of my own desire for this or that sunbeam, turning each leaf in its particular way--no two alike. Although I sip only of what has not been denied, it is enough to satisfy my thirst for the real. Permitted this place, I will be natural and alive.

For a moment I was home on the San Francisco Peaks of Arizona where not a blade of grass is contrived. Nothing exists but where it is utterly right--some lichens and sedges on the north side of rocks, others on the south, and then only in the northern shadows of this sky island. I have not seen, but am reassured by those who have, a groundsel thriving here and nowhere else.

It was on these peaks, more than a century ago, that C. Hart Merriam discovered the life zones concept: this slope grows Engelmann spruce, Alpine fir and bristlecone found elsewhere only at higher altitudes, or lower as the case may be. The angle of the sun, currents of air like rivers down valleys, the ambient temperature in October, all are facets of the biological diamond telling *Populus tremuloides* where and when to quake upon the mountain's flanks.

Thoughtless repetition is not a trait of the fugue. Its subject is not prefabricated to be dragged and dropped just anywhere. It is in the nature of counterpoint to scorn the cheapness of mass production, arrangement in rows and storage in stacks. The subject is answered by nature here in this key or that mode, and in this voice not that, crowned in chromatics, or unadorned.

The city is not a fugue. It churns, belches, and grinds, like a machine consuming flesh in one end, extruding four-inch lengths of sausage out the other. It does not surprise us, in cities, to hear the occasional nut, shouting obscenities to himself. We give him wide berth, reassuring ourselves that he is not connected and all is well.

But there is nothing on a mountain that is out of place, nothing that is not intimately joined with everything around it, not aware of how and why it got there, turned this angle, growing this high and no higher. The forest is a fugue. "Tug on anything in nature," said the wise John Muir, "and you'll discover it connected to everything else." It is a connection that binds us even to the troubled man whose rant we so properly discounted on the street before.

I heard his voice behind, a block away, and thought (as one might reasonably think) he had addressed another--perhaps a cyclist who had been thoughtless of pedestrians, or the driver of a limo who had cut him off. But I turned to discover

a man conversing with himself, responding well enough to the imaginary states of his marble-sized world, indecently to everything else. Relationships are wrong--men to other men and to the worlds they create, too often unfugue-like, contrived, invented, and inhumane. "A human architecture," writes Christopher Alexander, "does not only have the power to heal us. The very act of making it is itself a healing act for all of us." The fugue (if it is a *real* fugue) is a healing act; its composition and performance heals us all. If not a real fugue, it mutters disconnected obscenities at passers by, sure of its own logic, defined and known only to itself.

Alexander, an emeritus professor of architecture at U. C. Berkeley, rejects the modern notion that beauty is whatever we say it is. In his four-part *Nature of Order*, Alexander argues that beauty is related to life, and life to nature. Beauty exists in relationships: people to people and thing to thing. Things become part of a system, knowing their sense of belonging, only when "they co-operate or work together somehow." The rules whereby beauty comes to exist, and is perceived to be beautiful, are rooted in nature. Nature gives life. Whether it be a building, a city, a painting, or a fugue, it is beautiful only if it is perceived as having life.

This fugue has life.² It is beautiful because its voices and motives are interconnected--they cooperate and work together as a system.³ To the theorist it is tempting to assert that these relationships exist independently of sound. They are identifiable, after all, by studying the score; they can be discussed, written about, and represented in symbolic form like that of the timeline to the right.

But to theorize about the "life" of the fugue, without hearing it, ignores one of its cardinal relationships: that of the composer to his audience by way of the performer. As a theorist I am of course delighted to write about the fugue's interconnectedness, both to itself and things outside of itself. But to argue that this is all that matters would be mad--an obscenity.⁴ Not being a performer, I am humbled every time I hear David Korevaar give the fugue life. Without words, in phrasing, articulation, dynamics, and tones alone, he "explains" the myriad relationships of a fugue better than ever I could hope. His performance of this fugue is especially brilliant, the very best that I know.

² For more on the life of the fugue, study the author's notes on the fugue in E Major from Book I.

³ One of the most important connections of this fugue is to the chorale *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr* --"Glory to God in the Highest" (see also the organ trio BWV 664). Dr. Ledbetter notes that, "The subject of this fugue is the only one in the 48 which strongly suggests a chorale origin" (p. 312). Christmas joy perhaps accounts for Bach's exuberant inclusion of the symbols for his name (backward and forward), and three chromatic ascents of the tetrachord, his symbol for a crown.

⁴ "We need not ever construct sounds to construct music, regardless of their indispensability in its transmission, for once we have extracted their full burden of significant relational information...we have no further musical use to put them." This opinion, expressed in 1970 by Princeton professor Benjamin Boretz, represents a typically modern attitude toward the relationship (or lack thereof) between composition and performance. The quotation is from "Metavariations II," *Perspectives of New Music*, Spring/Summer 1970, p. 63)

But "Who Cares if You Listen?" Answering his own question, Princeton professor Milton Babbitt, writes that the composer of "serious, advanced, contemporary music" should not care in the least.⁵ The composer should concern himself as little with this question as the mathematician cares if we understand his latest theorem. Babbitt's argument is laced with appeals to math and science as the musician's model. As goes science, so goes the "evolution" of music: "A simple substitution of 'musical composition' for 'research,' of 'academic' for 'classical,' of 'music' for 'physics,' and of 'composer' for 'mathematician'."⁶

If this is the progress that music must make, then the average Joe might be forgiven for asking why he should not, along with Babbitt's dumping of the performer and audience, dump the composer too? He has mathematical equations and theorems enough, and it is simple to represent them in tones. If Babbitt is correct, then composition itself is anachronistic. Yet he is very explicit; composers need not sully themselves with the concerns of Joe:

I dare suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition.⁷

Were one to take these words seriously, Babbitt's is a city with no connection to its inhabitants. He is an architect who builds a house with no windows or doors, caring not that people cannot enter or depart. He has no interest in hosting those who might wish to enjoy his house, browse its library, sip coffee in its kitchen, or make love on the couch; he doesn't care if they perceive his house to be beautiful (assuming it is). His only joy is to know that the house exists, sufficiently stuck together to prevent collapse. He believes that no one except himself is qualified to express an opinion about his house, other than to observe that its name either begins, or does not, with the letter X.⁸

By contrast, Alexander's aesthetic is neither selfish nor proud--not a private arboretum where few (only the smart enough) are invited to stroll. Alexander has not hitched his artistic wagon to science, but life.⁹ He understands that *art is not*

⁵ Milton Babbitt, "The Composer as Specialist," reprinted as "Who Cares if You Listen?," *High Fidelity*, VIII/2 (February, 1958).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* Another reason Babbitt would like to dispense with performers is that they make mistakes: in his words, "falsification of the composition's total structure."

⁸ *Ibid.* Questioning the existence of "Absolute Good" (by implication beauty), Babbitt offers the following as a "public service": "There is only music whose title begins with the letter 'X,' and music whose title does not." Translation: humans have no right to evaluate things, only to describe them.

⁹ Babbitt's complaint that composition is not regarded enough like science is reminiscent of Rex Harrison's, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" His "Composer as Specialist" refers to life once--in literally its last word. If music is not treated more like science, he reasons, it "will cease to evolve, and, in that important sense, will cease to live." Here Babbitt reveals the materialist groin of his argument: reality (ergo life) exists only in the quantifiable and provable

a *science*. Art is life, and the essence of life is relationships: living beings to other beings and their environments--the mountains and trees, Nature's gifts to them and what she helps to shape.

world of the test tube. His references to evolution also betray a diachronic agenda in which music ought to "progress" from the simple (by implication less valuable) to the more complex (more valuable). Babbitt actually states this in terms the less "efficient" to the more. Thus the locus of value is complexity, intellect, and efficiency, versus a host of other things like elegance, beauty, and affect. This fugue, as complex as it may be, is less "evolved" than Babbitt's own *Fourplay*, which is therefore more progressive (valuable).