

Fugue No. 20

A minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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First there is the "crudely direct" and "portentous cliché" of the diminished seventh in the head motive, which "can only be interpreted in the spirit of parody" (p. 315). Second is the designation of this work, by Bach's son-in-law (Altnickol), as a fughetto, a term implying "lightness of treatment." Third, we have the rising trill at the end of the countersubject, which Ledbetter calls "a figure of comedy" (p. 316). Finally, he writes that "the extra-elaborate version of the bass trill given by Altnickol in the last bar gives just the right touch of Schlendrian pomposity to the conclusion of this tour of the keyboard" (p. 316).

While there is humor in this piece, there is also the hint of depth. For many years I've attempted to communicate the theory of similar objects within similar objects. These may be melodies, chord progressions, or rhythms. In the midst of these explanations I have invariably alluded to the Russian *babushka* doll. Once, after such a reference, one of my students, a lovely Russian girl named Tatyana, gave me one of those dolls, which I now brandish whenever possible--as brandished now. With stacking dolls in hand, opening each to reveal a smaller doll with every nested sound, students really get it! Their eyes light up and I think, "major connection!"

This fugue sports all three: nested melodies, chord progressions, and rhythms. Observe how the skips of the subject's tail are the motivic echo of the head: down-up-down. As for chord progressions, each statement of the fugal complex moves from I-V, followed by V-I. Each of these smaller progressions happens within the fugue's overall tonal gesture from i-V (mm. 1-13) and V-i (mm. 13-28).

The most important nesting of this fugue is metrical. There's a lot of rhythmic activity going on here, and it involves an unusually wide range of pulses, each being a nested division of its parent:

Two 32nd notes = one 16th
Two 16ths = an 8th
Two 8ths = a quarter
Two quarters = a half note

With apologies to my Russian friends, I have called the little wooden doll a *babushka*. Tatyana informs me that the correct term is *matryoshka*, which means "mother." Here too the doll has something to say about fugal technique. One cannot be a mother without having had children: offspring who are of the same looks, character, and demeanor, as mom herself. That, my friends, is what a fugue is all about!