

Sunday, January 28, 2024, 3pm  
Hertz Hall

## Filippo Gorini, piano

### *The Art of the Fugue*

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Contrapunctus I

Contrapunctus II

Contrapunctus III

Contrapunctus IV

Canon alla ottava

Contrapunctus V

Contrapunctus VI, a 4, in stylo francese

Contrapunctus VII, a 4, per augmentationem et diminutionem

Canon per augmentationem in contrario motu

Contrapunctus VIII, a 3

Contrapunctus IX, a 4, alla duodecima

Contrapunctus X, a 4, alla decima

Contrapunctus XI, a 4

Canon alla duodecima in contrapuncto alla quinta

Contrapunctus XII, a 4

recta  
inversa

Contrapunctus XIII, a 3

recta  
inversa

Canon alla decima in contrapuncto alla terza

Contrapunctus XIV (Fuga a 3 soggetti)

*This program will be performed without intermission  
and last approximately one hour and 40 minutes.*



In February 2020, with newfound time and thirst for something profound, I conceived a plan for a unique exploration. My work on *The Art of Fugue*, Johann Sebastian Bach's mystical, unfinished masterpiece, had begun in 2013, but it was only thanks to these long months of silence and the support of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award that I was able to study it with enough dedication to offer it to the public.

The triumphs of intellect and craft, the symbols and layers of meaning hidden within this work's conception are one with the moving singing that really is its heart. The view that it should be seen solely as a theoretical marvel is misguided: as the counterpoints and canons evolve in formal

complexity, so does their emotional tension, until the heartbreaking mystery of the unfinished Fuga XIV.

Nothing makes me as passionate as delving into a deep work of music, taking a long time to make sense of it, and then sharing what I have achieved with an audience. This is the heart of making music for me as a performer, and when I received the news of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award, I knew I could use their support to finally bring to the world a project on Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, a work I deeply love and had already been slowly studying since 2013.

—Filippo Gorini

(excerpted from album liner notes)

## PROGRAM NOTES

*The Art of Fugue* (*Die Kunst der Fuge*) was Johann Sebastian Bach's last masterpiece; Bach biographer Karl Geiringer calls it "one of the truly great creations of the human mind." With its 14 fugues (one of them incomplete) and four canons, it is both a textbook of the contrapuntal possibilities to be derived from one potent theme in D minor and a profound musical experience for both performers and listeners. Besides systematically presenting the various fugal techniques, its individual numbers carry us through worlds of distinctive, highly varied moods and colors.

Already within his lifetime, Bach was renowned as the master of contrapuntal music and specifically the fugue form. Cognoscenti including King Friedrich of Saxony clamored to hear him improvise fugues at the keyboard. *The Art of Fugue*—a title Bach probably didn't give the work himself (he actually used the Latin term *contrapunctus* or counterpoint rather than fugue throughout)—was probably largely composed during the early 1740s. However, in the last years of his life, Bach returned to it

frequently, revising it for publication and adding new fugues and canons to make it a comprehensive final statement. Despite the fact that he was losing his eyesight, he even launched a formidable final fugue, which would utilize an astounding four subject themes. His death from a stroke after an unsuccessful eye operation on July 28, 1750 left this fugue uncompleted.

His musician sons led by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach undertook to get the manuscript into order and published it posthumously in May 1751. However, Bach's death not only left the final quadruple fugue incomplete, but the exact order of the work's individual components undetermined. Another question also remained unresolved: exactly what instrument or instruments did Bach intend this massive work for? Most scholars believe it was designed for Bach's own instruments of harpsichord or organ, but it can be performed by small ensembles as well. String quartets have adopted the work most effectively, and this writer has even heard it played by a saxophone quartet. Bach himself was al-

ways very flexible about having his music played by whatever suitable forces were available.

The word “fugue” is derived from the Latin verbs “fugare” and “fugere,” meaning “to chase” or “to flee.” And that’s exactly what our ears hear in this form in which the various imitative entrances of the subject theme seem to race after each other. For *The Art of Fugue*, Bach created a fairly simple subject in D minor with a strong profile opening with a leap that makes it easily recognizable in all its appearances even if it is flipped upside down or “inverted.” Transitional episodes between the sections of imitative subject entrances give a sense of relaxation and contraction between the moments of maximum contrapuntal excitement.

The fugues follow a textbook-like progression of fugal techniques of increasing complexity. Bach created four “simple” fugues containing only one subject, three counter-fugues in which the subject is partnered with its inverted form, four fugues with multiple subjects (all derived from the core theme) used simultaneously, and two pairs of “mirror” fugues in which the second fugue is an exact reversal or mirror image of the first. Sometimes we also hear the fugue theme sped up (diminution) or slowed down (augmentation).

The four canons do not follow the fugue form, but instead are contrapuntal pieces for two or more voices chasing each other in imitation, using many of the same devices. Finally, there is the mighty torso of a fugue in three subjects, which Bach may have intended to be combined with the original theme to make a quadruple fugue before death stopped him.

John Stone tells us that many Baroque theorists—and perhaps Bach himself—saw the fugue as “an adequate human representation of the *harmonia mundi* (the ancient notion of musical spheres or a divine music created by the revolutions of the heavenly bodies.” Certainly, in its mathematical and

expressive perfection, *The Art of Fugue* is music that seems to touch realms beyond human existence. Two members of the Emerson String Quartet, which has often performed this work, expressed their awe-struck reactions. Violinist Eugene Drucker: “The whole last fugue seems to be striving towards something ineffable, something beyond the reach of mortal man (even as immortal a mortal as Bach). There is a sense throughout this cycle of Bach summing up a life’s work, utilizing every ounce of technical mastery and stretching the boundaries of what the ear can perceive and the mind can grasp.” And says violist Lawrence Dutton: “It unlocks a yearning that all of us have, to be connected to something bigger, something spiritual. Bach was making music that would connect people to God.”

## A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE FUGUES AND CANONS

**Contrapunctus I, II, III & IV:** Bach begins with four “simple” fugues introducing the work’s subject, a strong, straightforward theme that leaps upward to establish the chord of D minor and then moves smoothly to present its scale. In the third and fourth fugues, the subject is inverted, or turned upside down, but is still easily recognizable by the now downward jump between the first two notes. The counterpoint also becomes more chromatic and rhythmically complex. The third fugue introduces a variant of the subject that will be used in later fugues.

**Canon alla ottava:** Gorini has chosen to insert the four canons after each section of fugues. First we hear the canon at the octave with the two voices separated by that interval. The subject is related to *The Art of Fugue*’s main subject and still in D minor. In the second half of this canon, this subject is inverted. The rhythm is a fast, bouncing compound meter.

**Contrapunctus V, VI & VII:** With these three fugues, known as counter-fugues, the contrapuntal games become more complex. A new variant on the inverted version of the original subject, first heard back in *Contrapunctus III*, now becomes the main subject and is paired with its own inversion. Also these fugues use the *stretto* technique, in which all the entrances come more quickly and thus overlap each other. Described by Bach as “in the French style,” *Contrapunctus VI* is an elegant fugue, in which we hear the ornamentation popular in French Baroque music combined with the prominent dotted rhythms of the French overture style. It also deploys another contrapuntal device: the subject being answered by itself in diminution (notes going twice as fast). No. VII ups the ante by presenting the subject first in diminution, next in the treble at normal speed, and last, thundering in the bass, in augmentation (twice as slow).

**Canon per augmentationem in contrario motu:** This is the longest and most remarkable of the canons for two voices. It opens with the subject in the treble, followed by the bass imitating it in augmentation and upside down. Halfway through, the two voices change places. This canon’s harmonic coloration is daring with its heavy use of chromaticism blurring the key of D minor. At the end, everything resolves serenely into a chaste D in octaves.

**Contrapunctus VIII, IX, X & XI:** These are a set of intricate triple- and double-subject fugues that are highlights of *The Art of Fugue*. The magnificent No. VIII is the seedbed of the other three and especially of No. XI. Written for three voices, it presents three subjects: 1.) a twisting version of the original subject that incorporates chromatic motion as a key element; 2.) a more chromatically twisted version with stabbing repeated notes; and 3.) a breaking up of the

first subject into little three-note groups. All of these are marvelously combined into a stunning whole, dominated dramatically by those repeated notes. The subject of the double-fugue *Contrapunctus IX* stretches the opening fifth leap of the original subject by another octave and sets it on a furious race. Grounding it is the more sober second subject—which indeed is the original one heard in the opening fugues. No. X is another double fugue. Bach borrows the third subject from Fugue No. VIII—the one with the three-note groups—to launch the contrapuntal activity. High in its register, the treble voice soon presents a contrasting second subject. A triple fugue, *Contrapunctus XI* is perhaps the most stupendous contrapuntal display of the entire work. It borrows No. 8’s three subjects, but inverts them and places them in a different order. First we hear the three-note subject that ended No. 8 and opened No. 10. Next comes the wildly chromatic subject that opened No. 8. And last comes No. 8’s second subject with the hammering repeated-note motive, which lends great drama to the close of this fugue. All are eventually combined to create a dazzling spiral galaxy that finally drives D minor to D major.

**Canon alla duodecima in contrapuncto alla quinta:** Again a two-voice canon intervenes before we hear the final set of fugues. This is a whirlwind of a piece issuing from a six-note flourish that will add zest throughout. The imitation is at the twelfth—an octave plus a fifth.

**Contrapunctus XII and XIII:** These are two pairs of mirror fugues in which we hear first the piece in its rectus (original) position and then completely inverted in all parts. The result is that we get four fugues for the price of two. No. XII is solemn and relatively slow; No. XIII is lively and propelled by triplet figures and dotted rhythms.

**Canon alla decima in contrapunto alla terza:** The answering voice in this canon is set an octave and a third above the subject in the bass. With notes tied over the bar lines, Bach provides appealing rhythmic conflict between the two voices. Midway through, the subject moves up to the treble voice.

**Contrapunctus XIV:** This triple fugue with three subjects is Bach's most ambitious effort, left unfinished by his death in 1750. Scholars believe he intended it to be a quadruple fugue with the original *Art of Fugue* theme returning as the fourth subject and combined with the others. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the three subjects we have are all compatible with that original theme. The fugue opens with a majestic

slow theme in the bass. This is thoroughly explored before the second subject in flowing eighth notes appears in the alto voice. Then for his third subject, Bach dramatically set out the four letters of his name as they appear in German notation—B (for B-flat), A, C, and H (B natural)—in the tenor voice. After this is fully presented, Bach began combining all three subjects, but just seconds later, the fugue stunningly breaks off.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2024

*Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.*

---

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

At only 28 years of age, **Filippo Gorini's** musicianship has drawn unanimous acclaim in recitals at venues such as the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Konzerthaus, Vienna Konzerthaus, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, London Wigmore Hall, Società del Quartetto di Milano, Louis Vuitton Foundation Paris, Zurich Tonhalle, Van Cliburn Foundation, Vancouver Recital Society, as well as with orchestras such as the Santa Cecilia Orchestra in Rome, the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra, the Verdi Orchestra in Milan, the Flanders Symphony Orchestra, the Gyeonggi Philharmonic in Seoul.

Gorini's highlights from last season include recitals at Vancouver Recital Society, Konzerthaus Vienna, Festival Bach Montreal, Wigmore Hall, and San Carlo Theatre in Naples, as well as orchestral dates with Nagoya Philharmonic Orchestra and Ópera Nacional de Chile. In 2023–24, he will make his debuts at Teatro alla Scala di Milano, at Carnegie Hall in New York, and with the Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino conducted by Daniele Gatti, as well as a

chamber music tour to New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington (DC) for the Marlboro Music Festival. Today's concert marks his Cal Performances debut.

Gorini's multi-year project "The Art of Fugue Explored" has shown his vision and creativity to go further than just his performing abilities: with the support of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, he has released the work on Alpha Classics in 2021, performed it internationally over 30 times, and will release a series of filmed conversations on Bach's music involving personalities such as Peter Sellars, Frank Gehry, Sasha Waltz, Alexander Sokurov, Alexander Polzin, Alfred Brendel, and George Benjamin. Produced by Unitel, they were aired in Italy by RAI in October 2023, and will be available later internationally.

His upcoming "Sonata for 7 Cities" project, due for 2025–26, aims to show a new, responsible, and ethical approach to concert life with monthly residencies in Vienna, Vancouver, Cape Town, Santa Fe, Milan, and more, centered on performances, outreach, teaching,



and philanthropy. During this project he will also perform seven newly commissioned piano pieces by composers including Beat Furrer, Stefano Gervasoni, Yukiko Watanabe, Michelle Agnes Magalhaes, Federico Gardella, and Oscar Jockel.

Gorini has received the Premio Abbiati, the most prestigious musical recognition in Italy, in 2022, as well as the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award 2020 and First Prize at the Telekom-Beethoven Competition 2015. His three albums featuring Beethoven and Bach late works, released on Alpha Classics, have garnered critical acclaim, including a Diapason d'Or Award and five-star reviews in *The Guardian*, *BBC Music Magazine*, and *Le Monde*.

Alongside his solo career, Gorini has performed chamber music with musicians such as Marc Bouchkov, Itamar Zorman, Pablo Fernandez, Brannon Cho, and Erica Piccotti, in renowned festivals including the Marlboro Music Festival, the Prussia Cove Chamber Music Seminars, and Chamber Music Connects the World

in Kronberg with Steven Isserlis. He has taught master classes at the Liechtenstein Musikakademie, the University of British Columbia, the Royal Welsh College of Music, and the conservatories in Bergamo and Siena. Gorini follows actively the world of contemporary composition, and has played works by composers such as Stockhausen, Kurtág, Boulez and Lachenmann, as well as commissioning new pieces.

After graduating with honors from the Donizetti Conservatory in Bergamo and the Mozarteum University in Salzburg, Gorini's artistic development is now supported by the mentorship of Maria Grazia Bellocchio, Pavel Gililov, Alfred Brendel, and Mitsuko Uchida.

Keynote Artist Management  
9 Haines Lane  
Shaftesbury, Dorset, SP7 8AJ  
United Kingdom  
libby@keynoteartistmanagement.com  
+44 (0) 7950 150 601