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A Primer on the Many-Layered Fugue

By Anthony Tommasini, January 9, 2012

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Bach put everything he knew about writing fugues, which was everything there is to know about the matter, into “The Art of Fugue,” as he titled his collection of 14 fugues and 4 canons. Though Bach worked for years on the project, he never completed it: the final four-voice fugue was left unfinished at his death at 65 in 1750.

Bach’s aim was to show all the possibilities for contrapuntal treatment of a fugue theme, called the subject. He did not specify what instrument or instruments he was writing for: the fugues are notated on four separate musical staves. Though mostly played on harpsichord, organ or piano, they have been performed by various ensembles. Around 1960 the flutist Samuel Baron, who died in 1997, made an arrangement for the New York Woodwind Quintet and the Fine Arts String Quartet.

On Sunday afternoon at Town Hall the woodwind quintet Windscape joined the Orion String Quartet to play **elegant accounts** of six of these substantial works in Baron’s arrangements, a program that was part of the essential and affordable People’s Symphony Concerts. If the title of this Bach masterpiece makes it sound like a treatise on fugues, **Baron’s inventive arrangements highlight the inner workings of the pieces while clothing them in beguiling instrumental colors.**

Before the performances started, the violinist Daniel Phillips of the Orion quartet gave a chatty introduction explaining the “ground rules” of fugue writing. The players began with Contrapunctus I (Bach uses the Latin term for counterpoint), a piece Mr. Phillips described as one of the “so-called simple fugues.” This one was played just by the string quartet. Then Windscape played Contrapunctus III. Both **performances combined austere attentiveness to Bach’s contrapuntal writing with a plush, almost Romantic expressivity that invited listeners in.**

Windscape

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In Contrapunctus VII, played by both groups, Bach explores rhythmic augmentation: though the overall tempo of the fugue is steady, the subject is first played fast, then stretched out to a medium and, finally, a “glacial” version, as Mr. Phillips said. Here, with the different instrumental colors, it was easy to keep the voices clear in your mind.

The zippy Contrapunctus IX, given a nimble, lithe performance, showed that Bach could delve just as much into the complexities of counterpoint at a brisk tempo. The groups played the incomplete last fugue until the point at which Bach stopped composing, letting the voices just cut off, which was moving to hear: some in the audience quietly gasped.

They ended with the final work Bach composed, a chorale prelude for organ, “Vor Deinen Thron Tret’ Ich Hiermit” (“Before Your Throne I Now Appear”). The blind composer is thought to have dictated this piece from his death bed.

In the first half of the program the Orion Quartet gave a glowing and intelligent account of Brahms’s String Quartet in C minor (Op. 51, No. 1), marred only by occasional intonation problems from the eager first violinist, Todd Phillips. And **this well-attended concert opened with Windscape giving a warm, mellow performance of Samuel Barber’s wonderful 10-minute “Summer Music” for wind quintet, capturing its wistful mood but enjoying every playful, elusive flight.**

The next People’s Symphony Concerts program on Jan. 29 presents the pianist Peter Orth at Town Hall, 123 West 43rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 586-4680, pscnyc.org.

Windscape