

Don Freund: Composition Lessons with J.S. Bach

Jargon I Can't Avoid

General Music Items

Range: The distance between the highest and lowest notes of any musical unit. The overall range of Bach's keyboard for the WTC is 4 octaves, from C to C 2 octaves on either side of middle C.

Voice: All of the fugues and many of the preludes treat the keyboard as if it were a reduction of a vocal score, with 2 to 5 distinct independent melodic lines, which we talk about as if they were vocal voices — soprano on the top, bass on the bottom, alto and tenor in the middle, although in 3 or 5 voice fugues the middle voices become somewhat androgynous.

Texture: Covers a multitude of things: e.g., how many voices are operating, are they similar or contrasting, are they high or low in their respective ranges, are they moving fast or slow, smooth or disjointed.

“Spectrum” of 5ths: Unlike all the other terms here (which are officially sanctioned by the Society of Music Talkers and Writers), this is my own personal concept. Rather than using the traditional “Circle” of 5ths, I believe it's much more useful to look at the relationships of pitches on a spectrum that runs all the way from flat heaven to sharp nirvana:

.....*B^b F^b C^b G^b D^b A^b E^b B^b F C G D A E B F[#] C[#] G[#] D[#] A[#] E[#] B[#] F^x*.....

Each successive pitch (reading from left to right) is “generated” by the one preceding it, so “sharp” pitches are perceived relatively as children, “flat” pitches as parents.

Tonic: The principal reference pitch of a section or a work.

Dominant, Sub-dominant, Relative Major, Relative Minor: Pitches or key areas which relate to the Tonic in functional ways. On the Spectrum of 5ths, the Dominant is the child of the Tonic and is always prone to return back to momma. The Sub-dominant (parent of the tonic) must be handled with care, or it will be mis-interpreted as the Tonic. Relative Majors of Minors are keys that have the same key-signature as the Tonic key, and are therefore likely places for a Fugue Subject to wander off to.

Sequence: Direct repetition of a bit (or is it byte?) of musical material transposed up or down a notch.

Consonance/Dissonance: Terms referring to any sonority's comfort level, which can vary greatly from style to style. In Bach's style, dissonance is important as a directional element — something that requires a resolution. But sometimes it's fun to just soak in the sound for its own sake.

Suspension: A dissonance created when one voice hangs on to a note from a previous consonance while the general harmonic field changes.

Anticipation: The opposite of a suspension — here, one voice gets to the next harmony too soon, and waits for the others to catch up.

[more on back]

Cadence: A strong functional chord progression and textural configuration which clearly signifies the end of something, and an arrival at a predictable tonal destination.

Deceptive Cadence: A cadence in which the ultimate chord has been replaced by something unexpected.

Pedal Tone: This generally refers to the bass voice's hanging on to one pitch (usually tonic or dominant) for a very long time. Obviously, a term coined by someone with very slow feet.

Coda: Extra material appended to the end of a piece, after it has completed all its serious business. In Bach, it's usually the prolongation of tonic after the final cadence by means of a tonic pedal tone, but can also be triggered by a deceptive cadence.

Fugue Stuff

Fugue: A textural process in which one voice enters with a tune (see Subject below) and other voices enter in turn, each with that same tune. One way to listen to a fugue is to follow that tune as goes through the different voices and different keys — and sometimes different permutations (see Inversion and Augmentation below). But some of the most interesting things about fugues are the tunes that accompany the first tune (see Counter-Subject below) or sections where the main tune goes MIA (see Episode below).

Subject: The main theme of fugue, always presented by the first voice to enter.

Answer: What you might call the subject when the second entering voice plays it. If it's an exact transposition it's a Real Answer. If it's been modified slightly to make it fit the tonal structure it's a Tonal Answer. But I tend to always call them subjects, as in the definition following.

Counter-Subject: What the first entering voice plays when the second voice enters with the subject. Frequently it becomes a side-kick that's always there along with the subject. Sometimes a third voice which I'll call the Counter-Counter-Subject (which the first voice plays when the third voice enters with the Subject and the second voice is providing the Counter-Subject) is also used consistently to tag along with the Subject and Counter-Subject in their journeys through various keys and voice assignments.

Stretto: Using the subject in a voice before another voice has finished it, so that the subject becomes its own counterpoint.

Exposition: The first section of a fugue that ends when the last voice to enter completes its subject.

Episode: A section of the fugue where the subject isn't heard, at least not in its original complete form. Used to create contrast and links between areas devoted to presenting the subject.

Inversion: A term that has too many different meanings in music. In a fugue, it means turning the subject upside-down.

Augmentation: Doubling the rhythmic values of the subject to make it twice as long and twice as slow.