

## J. S. BACH'S *ART OF FUGUE*

**Noga Arikha**

I am not sure I love this piece as a piece of music. The phrase “Bach, to whom God owed so much”, pronounced by the French musicologist Georges Liébert, would seem not to refer to the *Art of Fugue* but to the glorious cantatas, masses, passions, and so on. Yet this sober piece seems a self-evident part of the created universe, like a strand of DNA. It is the music of the spheres for the age of reason - unmediated mathematical perfection, devoid of any meaning beyond its self. It is pure structure, a clear abstract thought. I am not even sure it is music. After all, it was conceived without any indication as to which instruments should play it. It transcends the bounds of musical codes, by delving beneath them.

The piece's starting point occurs as such a thought, or state of mind, at odd moments, loud enough in my inner ear, but never so obtrusive as to take over another thought that I may be wrestling with in that instant. It tends to accompany my days more than any other piece, as if it reigned over and above all melodies. Only the simplest theme appears in my mind; the more complex fugues that follow, although they are made of the simple parts and open with the theme I sing, are as impossible to recall with one's inner voice as an Indian raga. But all it takes, in this technological age, is to put on the recording (my favorite is by the four-viol consort Phantasm). Then my inner hum stops, and everything past, present, future, falls into place. The piece makes sense of all inner and outer structures. That is why it incarnates hope: it satisfies a profound longing for such sense to accompany each fleeting second of the one, finite life each of us is given to lead. And it consoles because it calms, holds together emotions, nerves, tissue – it is at once skeleton and skin, at once external to oneself and deeply familiar, as any consolatory company should be.

I cannot recall specific upsets that were consoled by this potentially infinite fugal overlap of one simple, singable theme taken to the extremes of contrapunctal complexity - only generally melancholy states of mind, which the piece both embraces and contains. Bach left the piece unfinished, though he worked on it for about a decade – perhaps, one would want to speculate poetically, precisely because the whole piece contains infinity, or rather, is the musical incarnation of the sign  $\infty$ , and could go on forever. None of the twelve contrapuncti need end; and there could be an infinite number of them. Yet each one is also sharply precise and therefore finite. The whole evolves in a three-dimensional space, can be drawn by arms and hands, and each individual strand can be followed with the ear and voice, even with the eye, until the last note of the last, incomplete contrapunctus, which leaves one hanging - but content.

Clear sense and direction within a structure of unutterable, mind-boggling complexity, whose constitutive parts are as easy to seize as concrete objects, at once complete and unending: this is the basis for serenity. Here is transcendence of finite body, time and space: a consolatory gift in the chaos and noise of all lives, and especially of our crowded, buzzing, credulous, cynical, restless world. We still hear the sound, there is still space for it in my mind, and time for it; its mysteries remain despite technical analyses: all this is ground for hope.

(612 words)