

Walter Riemer: My relationship with the "Art of the Fugue"

... has begun in the early nineteen-sixties, when the one or two last piano lessons of a school year at the conservatory of Vienna were dedicated to playing the work four-handed and unrehearsed, either on one piano (from the version by Bruno Seidlhofer) or on two pianos (from the version by Schwebsch). At that time already the work was fascinating to me, but there were plenty of other things to do, and so this activity was restricted to just "smelling the flavor" at the end of a school year.

After finishing my studies I neglected the "Art of the Fugue" for some decades. In 1988 I began organizing chamber music concerts at Niederfellabrunn Castle, Lower Austria, not far from Vienna. A few years later the American fortepiano specialist Richard Fuller (resident in Vienna) contacted us, wishing to play a concert in our castle. It was the opening concert of the 1993 season; the two of us played the last piece on the program (the G Major variations by Mozart) four-handed on his modern copy of a Walther fortepiano. My interest in playing the fortepiano grew, and so in 1994 we started playing recitals on two fortepianos; the second one was borrowed. From early summer 1995 on I had my own instrument.

Starting at that time, Richard Fuller and I toured the country for a few years with two fortepianos in a FIAT Ulysse, playing concerts. We soon supplemented the repertoire (limited to approximately three concert lengths) with the "Art of the Fugue", originally using the arrangement for two pianos by Schwebsch. We spent a week of undisturbed study with our instruments in the "Waldviertel" region not too far from Vienna. At the end of this week we had arranged a concert in the gothic church of Imbach in the southern part of "Waldviertel". This was the first time we played the work in public, whereby we had to be grateful for the very reverberant acoustics in that old church, benevolently masking various flaws in our performance. We found out that it was not at all easy, even for fairly experienced pianists, to bring the complex work to concert maturity in five days. In addition, various problems inherent in the Schwebsch arrangement became manifest: frequently the voices were, not quite resembling the original, set in octaves, sometimes even quite "maliciously" split to the two players, for instance in the triads of the Decima Canon; this resulted in substantial complications for the players. Altogether the Schwebsch version proved to be too "powerful", particularly for fortepianos, not sufficiently transparent, perhaps also too "romantic" in the overall sound impression. The necessity to turn pages quite frequently was very disturbing. Anyway, for future performances I entered the entire work into my music editing program on my computer. This led, in the end, still based on Schwebsch, to a version better adapted for fortepianos, also facilitating more convenient page turning. Our last adjustments were made in autumn of 2003.

Our enthusiasm (and that of our audiences) for the fortepiano version kept growing, and so the wish arose to make a CD recording, taking into account that among at least 150 recordings we knew of, there are some with one or two pianos, but none with fortepianos; almost all conceivable instrumentations, including string quartet and even saxophone quartet, had already produced recordings.



Our opinion, however, flourished that certain characteristics of the fortepiano almost predestine this instrument for the Art of the Fugue: the bell-like sound of the instruments, transparency and naturally (compared to harpsichord and organ) the dynamic possibilities, from which a musically as well as intellectually rewarding interpretation substantially benefits. Also the moderator offers an additional possibility of changing tone quality (its use should not be exaggerated, however), and I use it for one of the Canons and the Choral. It needs hardly be mentioned that occasionally the damper knee lever (whose counterpart in the modern piano would be the "pedal") contributes also.

Naturally, I am not in a position to criticize the way other musicians see the "Art of the Fugue"; however, from the point of view of a fortepiano player, I must admit that for me many recordings (particularly those of ensembles) seem too loud and not sufficiently differentiating as far as agogics and dynamics go. I can understand this: each player, enraptured by the voice he is playing himself, is liable to play himself into the foreground, the overall impression thus becoming louder and louder, very significantly in the frequent stretto stretches. Naturally, to control this in an ensemble is much more difficult than for a single player.

In the course of my studies of the work and the literature on the subject for many years I was somewhat irritated by some authors "proving" that Bach had planned a certain determined instrumentation, or even (theories go that far) deliberately not communicated this (in the sense of posing a mystery for the Mizler Society or the public in general). Thus Dentler presents himself convinced that a specific quintet instrumentation was Bach's desire, while Moroney explains apodictically that the work was obviously written for harpsichord. The first author seemingly fails to consider or mention that the very last fugue (XIV), the unfinished quadruple fugue, the climax of the entire work, in the autograph is not written in four voices score form, as printed in the first edition, but in two system piano notation! He also tries to prove scientifically and irrefutably that the piano (in the broader sense) cannot have been considered, many of his arguments themselves lacking an indisputable basis.

For a long time the work was considered unplayable for one person on a single piano. Moroney must be praised for reducing the four-voiced score of the original edition to normal piano systems and so making it possible for today's players to read and study the work. I shall mention some difficulties later, but on the whole it can be done, there is only one spot that is in fact unplayable also on a fortepiano: This is a widespread chord of three notes towards the end of Contrapunctus XIII inversus (in measure 59), which simply cannot be played with two hands; the remedy is, however, quite easy, playing the middle note simply one octave higher, thus not changing anything in the substance. In the rectus version of the Contrapunctus XIII the problem does not exist, by the way (as one might have expected): for me this is a little error of the "nearly" infallible composer, who simply ignored the difficulty in "inversus".

There is a similar situation in the same Contrapunctus XIII, four measures before the end: in the autograph there is a trill on a half note in "inversus", which is hardly playable on a key instrument; in "rectus", however, this trill is missing, although it would be playable quite easily there. In the original edition the apparently missing trill was supplemented. In the autograph, by the way, Bach wrote these two versions of the three part Contrapunctus in six systems arranged vertically (inversus above, rectus below), so that the difference should have been quite obvious to him: perhaps the trill was not so important to him? Anyhow, it was written where it is hardly playable and it is missing where it would be easily executable. Moroney mentions this discrepancy without further comment, writes the trill in both versions and sticks nevertheless to his firm opinion that the work must have been written for a keyboard instrument (this, by the way, is my opinion, too).

Here these interesting stretches are shown in facsimile:

From measure 1 on (beginning)



Measure 68



"inversus"

CP XIII

"rectus"



These are the measures 68 in the first printed edition. The Trills appear in both instances: in "inversus" (right) very similar to the autograph, whereas in "rectus" (left) rather a "modern" Trill symbol is printed (Tr).



Moroney here follows the first edition exactly: The trill in "rectus" (in the following image on the left side) is executable as a long trill on the keyboard instrument, whereas in "inversus" (right image) the situation allows only a turn, which is what I play there.



My opinion is: playing and/or omitting the ornament changes practically nothing in the meaning of the music. Anyway, ornaments were a very individual affair in Bach's time.

A very interesting example for this issue is supplied by the final fugue Contrapunctus XIV, starting from that spot where the B.A.C.H. subject appears (measure 193). This subject has a length of four measures, or better (because of alla breve time) eight half measures. On the half note in the seventh half measure (measure 196) there is a trill that is written both in Moroney's edition and in the autograph; it is actually of very great musical importance and renders the

subject even more impressively towards its end. In the first edition this trill is missing, and consequently it is equally not present in all further instances of the subject. Only in measure 220 in a similar situation there is a turn, however not on a half note but in detail expanded with two eighth notes and a quarter note. This turn appears in all sources.

Moroney obviously follows the autograph and writes only the first trill. However, in this Contrapunctus all these trills would be executable fairly easily and render considerable musical "effect". This does not seem to be worth mentioning for Moroney in his "critical report". Neither is the fact that the autograph, as already mentioned above, is written in two system piano notation. One might imagine that Bach did not write the rest of the trills (after the first one) simply because its almost upsetting effect (the "Affect", according to C. P. E. Bach) is so natural that any good "Musikus" would play it naturally.

Dritte Abtheilung.
Von den Trillern.

§. 1.

Die Triller beleben den Gesang, und sind also unentbehrlich. Vor Tab. IV diesem brauchte man sie nicht leichte eher, als nach einem Vorschlage Tab. IV. Fig. XXII. (a), oder bey Wiederholung der vorigen Note (b); im erstern Falle heißt man sie angeschlossene Triller; heute zu Tage aber kommen sie bey gehenden, bey springenden Noten, gleich im Anfange, oft hinter einander, bey Cadenzen, auch außerdem, über langen Haltungen (c), über Fermaten (d), bey den Einschnitten ohne vorhergegangenen Vorschlag (e), auch nach solchem (f) vor. Folglich ist diese Manier anjesho viel willkührlicher als ehedem.

§. 2.

Dem ohngeacht ist sehr nothwendig, daß man, zumahl bey affectuösen Stellen, mit dieser Manier besonders rathsam umgehe.

Vom Vortrage.

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gens üben ihr Instrument bloß maschinenmäßig aus, da zu dem rührenden Spielen gute Köpfe erfordert werden, die sich gewissen vernünftigen Regeln zu unterwerfen und darnach ihre Stücke vorzutragen fähig sind.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach never gets tired of pointing out that the player has much liberty; to use it correctly, however, requires, besides having good technical control over the instrument, above all "taste", which can be acquired only from appropriate guidance by and listening to good musicians.

The topic of "ornaments" is also enlightened by the following: There is no autograph of the Decima canon; the only source is therefore the first edition. There, in the measures 37 and 76, most strangely noted graces can be found:



Left: measure 37



Right: measure 76

The slurs, particularly in measure 76 on the right side image, are interpretable only with difficulty.

I am sure the early publishers had a lot of trouble with this. The graces are similar, but not identical, although they no doubt are intended to express the same meaning. Moroney standardizes these graces by following the first edition, but leaving to the player the actual way of execution, as follows:



Schwebsch writes the grace with only one slur (in the following left image) and suggests the execution in a footnote (in the middle image), in which he proposes to play the first grace as a long appoggiatura and the second as a long ("after"-appoggiatura, if there is such a term).

Seidlhofer also recognized the problem and corrects the slur setting, suggesting two appoggiaturas (right image: this is the way I play it).



Conclusion: the work is playable on a piano with two hands (or on a harpsichord or on a fortepiano, whose octave is shorter than that of a modern piano by approximately 2 mm, and whose keys drop not so deep, even somewhat more easily!). The 5 octaves of the instruments of Bach's time are sufficient, whereas several voices exceed the range of any single wind or string instrument (particularly in the tenor voice, therefore the choice of 5 instruments by Dentler). On the fortepiano several difficult stretchings of the hand are easier than on the harpsichord because the action is smoother. The number of soundless finger switchings on a pressed key in some individual fugues would almost equal the corresponding number in the entirety of Bach's "Well-tempered Piano"!

Opinions stating that the work is not playable with two hands, are still around, for example in:

<http://pipedreams.publicradio.org/articles/artoffugue/performed.shtml>,

where one can read:

" ... the fact that two movements (mirror fugues XII and XIII) are not playable by one person at a keyboard ... "

Actually, however, the mirror fugue XII can be played with some distorted fingerings, admittedly not easily. In the mirror fugue XIII inversus, as mentioned already above, there is a note in the measure 59 that cannot be played as written; but everything else is playable with a bit of acrobatics.

On <http://pipedreams.publicradio.org/articles/artoffugue/keyboard.shtml> there is also the following statement:

"Only two sections cannot be played by one pair of hands - the pedal-point finale of Contrapunctus VI (for the pedal harpsichord or organ), and the two mirror fugues."

Owing to the shorter octave of the fortepiano (compared to the modern piano) by 2 mm, even the conclusion of Contrapunctus VI can be mastered, provided the hands are not too small, by making use of the slowing down (ritardando) towards the end, without unnatural arpeggios becoming necessary. One should also mention that some fugues and canons are typical piano setup, for example in particular the two first canons and the above-mentioned Contrapuncti XIII. As far as the pedal-point goes: it is a well accepted practice to renew a pedal-point occasionally on a "Clavier".

Why should Bach have considered different instrumentations for the various movements, thus making a given performance substantially more difficult? And I cannot believe that Bach did not intend his work to be performed: he was primarily a practical musician, and his work belongs to the best-sounding in the literature; one must hear it!

Naturally one should also play it: when studying it (particularly the version for two hands) I always felt sorry for those unlucky persons (nearly all the people on this planet !) who would never have the opportunity to play this work.

And with astonishment one notices that for example the Contrapunctus II uses the jazz characteristic of "notes inegales" continuously and thus even "swings" (by the way, there are other examples among Bach's works, such as the Corrente in the sixth Partita, there however based on syncopating the accompanying voice; not to forget the Contrapuncti XIII rectus and inversus in the "Art of the Fugue")! Naturally one must also play it "swinging", but obviously Bach already had the feeling for the "notes inegales". In measure 21 of Contrapunctus II there is even something which a jazz musician would quite rightfully call a "break"! And the Decima Canon for my ears almost foresees Alban Berg.

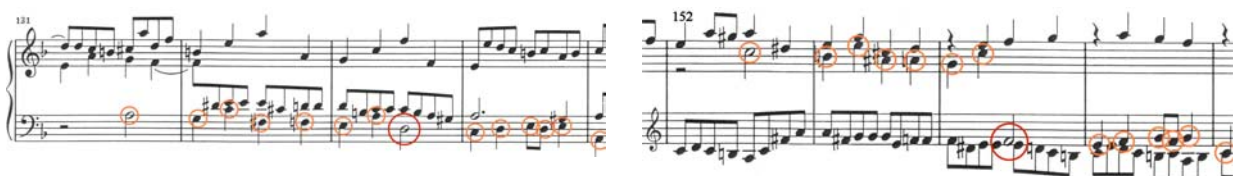
One of many possible arguments against the dedication of the work for a key instrument (and in detail discussed by Dentler) are occasional occurrences of very long notes, frequently in low register as pedal-point, sometimes, however, in higher register also, which can hardly sound audibly over several measures on a stringed keyboard instrument. An argument against this can be that renewing this tone occasionally is an old and legitimate pianistic trick; Bach himself supports this idea occasionally by the fact that the note later appears in another voice (although perhaps only as an eighth note), so that the sound of this eighth is carried on by actually keeping the key depressed (so for example in Contrapunctus XII in measure 55 or in Contrapunctus XIII rectus in the measures 39 and 40). Another aspect is that most significantly in Contrapunctus VII ("per Augmentationem et Diminutionem") the subject appears augmented, that is to say, a half note in the original form of the subject becomes a whole note (or, if diminished, a quarter note). It seems well planned that the augmented subject appears first in the bass, then in the tenor, afterwards in the alto and finally in the soprano voice (and every time not in the highest positions): Bach seems to "train" the audience, making use of the fact that a stringed keyboard instrument sustains the sound in low registers long enough to enable the listener to pursue the augmentation easily; later, the listener has in the meantime "learned" to focus his attention on the augmentation and hears it easily even in the soprano voice, and despite the frequent strettas along the whole course of the fugue.

An argument in favor of the keyboard instrument results from occasional omissions of ornaments in the Henle Urtext edition by Moroney where it might be in practice not executable on the piano (some of this was discussed already further above). A very good example is the three voice Contrapunctus VIII:

On the half note in the third measure of the first subject (the fugue has three subjects!) there is a trill with "Nachschlag" (termination).



In the measures 133 and 154 of the Henle edition, for example, this half note appears in a middle voice; in both cases it must be played with the left hand (also executing the bass voice), because the soprano voice to be played with the right hand lies too far above. Descending eighth notes in the bass during the duration of this half note make an execution of the ornament on the half note impossible:



In the first edition, however, this ornament appears everywhere on this half note. One might pose the question: why for heaven's sake, did Moroney not include this ornament in his "Urtext" edition, although easily executable by any wind or string instrument in the ensemble? Should he have tried to conceal an argument against dedication of the work for keyboard, resulting from the

fact that these ornaments would not be executable on a harpsichord, which would contradict his opinion that the work was specifically written for harpsichord?

Moroney's honour must be re-established: In Bach's handwritten autograph these ornaments do not appear! Thus the argument that the work was intended by its creator for a keyboard comes to life again. Moroney, by the way, discusses this in his "critical report" (editor's report) in detail. Conclusion: Bach omitted ornaments where they would not be playable on a keyboard instrument, although they would be easily playable on other instruments; this shows very clearly that Bach had at least considered the execution on a keyboard instrument.

A clear argument for this can also be recognized in Contrapunctus IX, measures 67 to 72: Wherever the whole note over-bound into the next measure is easily playable on a piano, it is written; in measure 70, however, where the whole note would not be playable, a quarter note is sufficient, although the situation is not in principle different from the preceding occurrences.

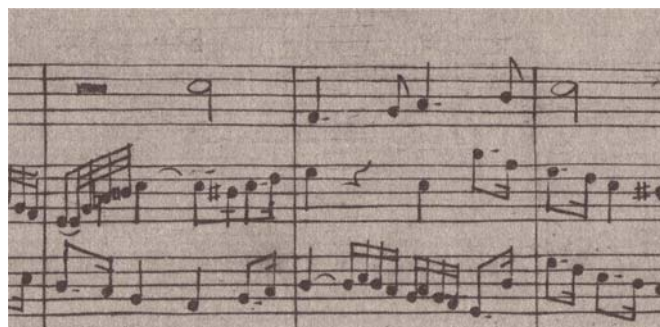


Another interesting circumstance shall be discussed briefly: Forever an issue among experts has been whether in Contrapunctus VI the eighth notes after dotted quarter notes shall be executed as sixteenth notes to conform in rhythm with the diminished form of the subject. I consider this wrong, since thereby the rhythm in the basic form would be falsified. In measure 65, however, in Moroney's Urtext version an inaccuracy is noticeable: the last note in the upper system is both an eighth and a sixteenth note at the same time, which probably really cannot be:



Autograph

First print



There the autograph and the first edition both show an eighth note in the soprano, and this is obviously correct.

On the question of playability on a "Clavier" of any type another argument should not remain unmentioned: Nobody will probably want to doubt seriously that the "Well-tempered Clavier" was written for "Clavier". Nevertheless there are some spots that cannot be executed note-faithfully with two hands on a piano, for example a C in the bass voice in measure 70 of the fugue No. 22 in B-flat minor in the volume 1.



By the way: the ability of the fortepiano to extend notes with "pedal" (= damper knee lever) can help in such situations quite a bit!

Conclusion: it seems to me very probable that Bach conceived the work for a keyboard instrument, because he obviously took care of writing in a manner to make execution on such an instrument possible (although not very easy); I feel even legitimized to play the work on a fortepiano, although no doubt it was not dedicated for that expressively by Bach. My confidence results from the fact that Bach never knew a fortepiano of the Mozart type (for instance by Stein or Walther), nor could foresee the development of the instrument. I am convinced that hearing his works on such instruments would have pleased him very much!

The order in which the fugues and canons are to be played has forever been subject of an endless discussion. In this respect I decided (contrary to our earlier performances with two fortepianos) to follow Guenter Jena, whose book "Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen" is a remarkable source of humane and humanistic ideas in Bach's work and contributes substantially to a deeper understanding of the work. Beyond that it argues compellingly and comprehensively for this order. Jena in his book calls the "Art of the Fugue" a "musical wisdom book". In my opinion, Jena's book should be called a "human wisdom book".

Worth mentioning is another book, whose topic is not specifically the "Art of the Fugue", but rather the practice of execution in general, in particular of the seventeenth century up to the nineteenth: Helmut Perl, "Rhythmische Phrasierung in der Musik des 18. Jahrhunderts; A contribution to performance practice". This book has exerted a substantial influence on my playing, and not only regarding baroque, classical and romantic period, but even into modern times, because it reveals simply very comprehensively and (compared to the original sources) quite understandably, from where and how all that emerged.

A special topic is naturally the speed of execution: Total recordings of the work (of those, from a research in Internet there are more than 150) in the majority last for about 75 to 90 minutes; the longest takes 2 hours and 27 minutes, whereas for the shortest the duration cannot be established because some movements are missing in the recording. Obviously the tempo feeling of the interpreters is very different; probably also the choice of instruments will play a substantial role. I do not have an overview, acquired by hearing, of the multiplicity of recordings, and therefore would like to discuss a very important example only briefly:

We saw the Contrapunctus XII on our fortepianos as a venerable piece of music, and we played it in approximately 3:10 minutes. By coincidence I discovered a piano recording by Mueller Bohn, who masters the piece in 1:40; this interpretation is, no doubt, quite attractive as a (Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach would probably use the word "hurtiges" = "nimble") piece of dance, but differs from our view very much. The total duration of Mueller's performance is rather short with 72:42, but not extremely short.

Jena mentions the characteristic Sarabande rhythm in the three-half time of this Contrapunctus XII: the Sarabande was a slow walking dance. However, Jena does not comply with this on the

CD (included with the book, with orchestra instrumentation, and directed by Jena himself): he takes only about 2:05, and that is a pretty quick Sarabande! He even writes: "one means to hear, not humans, but a God dancing. Majestically the bass voice comes in first ...". With Jena the God dances quite "hurtig", too! The bass voice can hardly be felt in this interpretation as particularly majestic.

Anyhow, I stick to our tempo which makes it possible to the listener to become aware of most amazing harmonies, as well as to pursue the voices, much better than slipping past in high tempo. Only with this tempo a purely sensual enjoying of a special sound experience that is typically offered by a fortepiano is possible. Admitted: for a Sarabande we were somewhat slow, but is the Contrapunctus XII really a Sarabande?

An intermediate word to the "most amazing harmonies": the fact that Bach here and there invented harmonies and modulations which perhaps emerge only very much later with Schubert, is not completely new; but a concentrate of it, as it appears in the second half of the Contrapunctus XI, does not seem very common in tonal music anywhere else. One should hear and naturally also play this consciously under this aspect.

Back to the tempo: In principle I favor a moderate tempo for most movements, except for the few fast movements like IX and XIII as well as the Octave Canon and the Duodecima Canon. The fascinating harmonics, which confer a special sparkling to the whole work, simply need, in order to be enjoyed, time for the listener as well as the player. These harmonics become much more effective on the fortepiano than in any different instrumentation ("bell-like sound").

After some years without "Art of the Fugue" we decided to finally tackle the project of a CD recording, found also a potent producer and prepared for a concert in the autumn 2003 in Palais Eschenbach in Vienna. In the week following the concert, the studio work was scheduled. Richard, however, was dissatisfied with the acoustic result of the first sample recordings and was suddenly not enthusiastic any more about the CD project, and so the project was given up rather unexpectedly.

I did not want this under any circumstances, and so I looked first (unsuccessfully) for another fortepiano player who would be interested; the organizational conditions (suitable instrument, sufficient time and human harmony between the players) being of importance, too. Finally I had a look at the two hand "Urtext" version by Moroney, published by Henle, and I decided to have a look into it to find out whether this was feasible at all.

In short: the effort to learn to play the work (which I knew pretty well) alone was enormous, particularly because of the distorted fingerings which are necessary very frequently (see at the right the example from Contrapunctus XI, measures 22 - 25).

The image shows a musical score for Contrapunctus XI, measures 22-25. The score is written for two hands on a grand staff. The right hand part is heavily annotated with green and pink markings, indicating complex fingerings and articulation. The left hand part also has some annotations. The score is a two-measure phrase in 3/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand part consists of a series of eighth notes, while the left hand part consists of a series of quarter notes. The annotations include numbers 1-5 for fingers, and various symbols for articulation and dynamics.

One may not permit oneself any error, because then the articulation and various other aspects for the following measures are spoiled; thus many fugues and/or particular stretches had literally to be trained (as a beginner would have to) in very short sections, in order to finally make concentrating on the music possible. Most fugues are not fast (they are not virtuoso pieces), but fingerings must nevertheless be established securely, because there is not enough time to read, interpret and execute the fingerings written for every single eighth note.

Most interesting was also the experience that I really became acquainted with the fugues (which I had played several times in concerts with two fortepianos before) only now when I played them

alone! I am also convinced that the interpretation alone is much better than we ever accomplished together because one hand (or better, two) and one brain control and coordinate everything.

Admitted: the work was not originally written for fortepiano: Bach was not too fond of the fortepianos of his days; many Contrapuncti were already finished in the forties or even earlier. However, the fortepiano of the seventies of the eighteenth century (when the original of my fortepiano after Andreas Stein was built) had improved significantly, both technically and especially in sound; I am convinced, Bach would have liked them. Thus I believe despite the fact that Bach probably conceived the work primarily for keyboard instruments, and there probably primarily for the harpsichord (the clavichord being for a monumental work not impressive enough and for a performance in a concert hall unsuitable, even if it offers interesting dynamic and sound possibilities).

In the meantime I also heard several CD recordings, mostly with keyboard instruments, such as the modern piano recordings of Grigory Sokolov, Evgeni Koroliov and Hans Petermandl (the latter appeared in autumn 2004), as well as of Davitt Moroney (using the harpsichord). The harpsichord offers substantially more transparency than the modern piano, but lacks the dynamic possibilities; nevertheless, I was able (because of the special transparency inherent to harpsichords), to follow the voices well. Whether any listener who does not know the work as well as I do succeeds in this, must remain undecided. Disturbing for me was the continuous Forte: no dynamic differentiation, for instance the interludes equally powerful as the exposition or development, at the most here and there not so loud through having fewer voices. Particularly with the longer stretches the charm of the music is lost through the lack of dynamics; the replacement by agogics and articulation is not sufficient. Positively must be mentioned that the harmonious structure comes out very clearly on the harpsichord, supported by the moderate speeds Moroney chose. The sound of early fortepianos is still fairly close to that of the harpsichord, regarding overtone spectrum (and provides equal transparency), however already offers (limited a bit in extent) the dynamics of the modern piano. On the other hand, the fortepiano makes the harmonious structure substantially more clear than the modern piano. In his presentation of his CD in autumn 2004, Hans Petermandl pointed out several times that it seemed conceivable for him that Bach had at least considered the fortepiano. The fact that a musician like Bach would have misjudged the possibilities of the fortepiano appears to me inconceivable.

Played on the fortepiano, the work is even more beautiful than on the two alternatives, above all more transparent, and this is why I play it on this instrument.