"The Usefulness of Such Artworks": Expression, Analysis, and Nationalism in The Art of Fugue

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Marpurg...begleitete die Ausgabe mit einer Vorrede, wohin sehr viel Gutes und Wahres über den Werth und Nutzen solcher Kunstwerke gesagt ist.1
—Johann Nikolaus Forkel on The Art of Fugue (1802)

From all this it might appear to be more of an instructive work than a performable one, and from this standpoint alone it will be judged if, because of its high master-craftsmanship, its aesthetics are not allowed to become known.2
—C.L. Hilgenfeldt on The Art of Fugue (1850)

Marpurg...contributed a preface to this edition which contains many just observations on the value and utility of such treatises.3
—Johann Nikolaus Forkel on The Art of Fugue as translated by Charles Sanford Terry (1920)

The Art of Fugue has always, it seems, been perched ambiguously somewhere between expression and theory. Compare, for example, Forkel's words on the subject with those same words as translated one hundred and eighteen years later in the English language edition of Charles Sanford Terry, both given above. The conceptual transformation of the work, which allowed Forkel's original, "solcher Kunstwerke" to be rendered by Terry as "such treatises," epitomizes the perplexing distance maintained by nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics between the art of criticism and The Art of Fugue. It was Forkel who began the transformation in 1802 by hinting that Bach's goal in writing The Art of Fugue was pedantic.

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“to demonstrate the possible ways in which a single fugue theme could be treated.” As if apologetic about his affection for the collection, he segregates it from other Bach works by raising the issue of its “worth and usefulness,” a quality presumably self-evident for most artworks, but apparently not for such artworks as this one. It was a judgment that would be repeated over and over by Bach critics, to whom Forkel represented the most authoritative voice. Nevertheless, Forkel did specifically call *The Art of Fugue* a work of art, a designation that was in jeopardy by 1850, when C.L. Hilgenfeldt sounded the warning that sits chronologically between the two versions of Forkel given above. 

Tellingly, in 1967, one hundred and seventeen years after Hilgenfeldt—almost exactly the distance between Forkel and his translator—a similar warning appeared in Marcel Bitsch’s edition of the *The Art of Fugue*.

Masterpiece of abstract music, one has often said, wishing to retain only the intellectual aspect of the *Art of Fugue*. One cannot rise up with enough force against this brief, biased and bigoted judgment. Of course the work exists on an intellectual plane. Each fugue is fitted up by a master-hand, all the details of craftsmanship have been the object of a minute adjustment, and the ensemble functions like a machine of high precision. Bach is an excellent artisan. But to wish to retain only this aspect of the *Art of Fugue* is to lessen considerably its value and import, to falsify deliberately the sense. The contrapuntal combinations are nothing in themselves and constitute for the work merely an inferior plane of existence.

Rather than a mistranslation, then, Terry’s alteration of Forkel would seem something he felt enabled, even obliged, to make in order to accurately reflect the work as it existed for his own generation. It stands, as
does all criticism, simultaneously in the *poietic* and *esthesic* planes, a chronicle of accumulations each altered by those that have come before and each in turn altering for all later viewers the form of the thing being viewed. Terry's *The Art of Fugue* is *The Art of Fugue* as it had been received through the course of the century, no more confined by Bach's original conception of the work than Terry's English was by Forkel's original German.

From this perspective, Bitsch's complaint becomes the fulfillment of Hilgenfeldt's prophecy and is evidence of a continuing struggle over the spirit of *The Art of Fugue*. It has been a one-sided struggle, a point that is confirmed by Hilgenfeldt and Bitsch's own treatment of the piece. For despite their polemical stances, neither was willing or able to provide an actual analysis of the expressive content whose absence in the critical record they so lamented. In the quotations given above one sees how both men felt compelled, even while decrying the preponderance of merely technical critiques of the work, to praise this aspect at length and in much greater detail than is given to what Hilgenfeldt calls vaguely, "its aesthetics," and Bitsch, equally as vague, "the sense."

This pattern places both men in what I would call the mainstream of *The Art of Fugue*’s critical reception. It is an understanding of the work characterized foremost by reticence over the expressive potential of both the overall cycle and its individual fugues. Paradoxically, it is an understanding that often claims that *The Art of Fugue* is a work of poetic or emotional power while seldom venturing to identify the source of that power in terms other than its exhaustiveness or its impressive contrapuntal achieve-


ments. The pattern has continued to exercise its hold more recently, as evidenced by Hans T. David’s final words on the subject, published posthumously in the journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute.

In considering *The Art of Fugue*, it is important to remember that Bach wrote a work of music not a book of theory. Although theoretical knowledge helped Bach to arrive at the extreme variety he accomplished within the work, he was at least as concerned with the expressive possibilities of each of the specific technical designs he chose. Therefore, a discussion of the technical principles found in the individual movements of *The Art of Fugue* turns of necessity into an aesthetic discussion as well.6

However, one searches David’s analysis in vain for the point at which this turn from technical to aesthetic occurs. The only places in which the issue is raised to any level of specificity is in his discussion of Contrapunctus II and XI, both of which he claims fulfill the requirements for classification as a *fuga chromatica* or, according to Johann Gottfried Walther’s *Musicalisches Lexicon* of 1732, *Fughe passionée*. Nearing the end of his analysis, he offers his most specific observation on expressivity. “The work is a supreme masterpiece of much contrapuntal technique and ingenuity. In every case, however, the density of contrapuntal detail results in extreme musical and emotional intensity.”7 As with Hilgenfeldt and Bitsch, however, the lack of further elaboration leaves one with the sense that the emotional intensity is hardly more than a product of the listener’s awe at Bach’s technical achievement.

A similarly contradictory formulation comes out of the more recent work of Christoph Wolff.

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Among much discussion of the various principles of organization that characterize both the Berlin manuscript and the first printed edition, Wolff's most pertinent statement regarding the expressive content of the piece is well in line with the tradition of reception I am tracing: "By letting the substance of the musical subject be logically uncovered and systematically exhausted, by employing traditional and novel techniques of composition as well as old and new elements of style, Bach created an autonomous work of art that embodies the character and universality of his art."8

Again, the emotional potential of the work is tied to its stylistic breadth and technical exhaustiveness, an exercise in the monumental and the logical which impresses only insofar as it remains aloof from emotional particularity.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND THE ART OF FUGUE

After Forkel's, the most influential study in the analytical reception of The Art of Fugue was Moritz Hauptmann's 1841 Erläuterungen zu Johann Sebastian Bach's "Kunst der Fuge," published as the preface to Czerny's new edition on two staves with piano fingering.9 It was the first systematic attempt to analyze the entire work, and Hauptmann's skill and historical sensitivity make it an important document still. He displays all of the caution one has come to expect regarding expressive content, warning his readers again and again not to look too far past the technical. On the first four fugues, he writes: "These four fugues, despite their rich and beautiful harmonic tex-


ture, are merely the exposition of the subject.” On Contrapunctus VI and VII: “The combinations of these last two fugues, so spiritually derived and interwoven into a harmonic whole, appear here in a work whose purpose is to display art or skill.”

The most important section of the essay comes near the end when Hauptmann, a self-proclaimed Hegelian, laments his inability to approach the subject of the overall impact of the whole work as a unified aesthetic object.

The foregoing remarks are mainly concerned with the individual pieces of the work and their purpose and function in the total scheme. Therefore, little was said about the actual musical life and essence of the work as a whole. The living quality is not contained in abstract moments, nor in the special or general aspect as such, but in the binding together, the unifying and encompassing of these contrasted elements.

As a Hegelian, Hauptmann sees the analyst’s responsibility as one of synthesizing the opposed elements of form and content.

Although the form, however, is subjected to the content in individual places, so in the totality the form is given through the content: musical form arises from the total content of whatever is demanded by the musical expression of each era. So form is very much both a determined thing and a determining one, and only when these two aspects exist together will it prove itself fit and perfect for expression in the poetic and artistic sense.

Noting his own failure to fulfill this obligation, Hauptmann makes his most prescient observations about *The Art of Fugue* as it existed for his readers.

Fugue forms, as an expression given by the nature of the content, belong to an earlier epoch. With Sebastian

11. Ibid., 51.
12. Ibid., 64-65.
Bach, indisputably the greatest and most profound writer of fugues, the historical period of the fugue indeed appears closed, or at least to be approaching its end. Shortly after him there entered into this art form, in the place of a living production, a certain traditional quality, a merely formal essence, from which the nurturing root had been removed.

His argument is remarkable for its insight into the historical constructedness of perceived "universal" aesthetics—perhaps the most significant observation yet made about The Art of Fugue as a historically contingent text. The aesthetic status of The Art of Fugue is rendered ambiguous, for Hauptmann, because the position of the genre of fugue itself had changed. Synthesis of form and content is made impossible by the newly problematic status of fugue as an aesthetic object. Content, in the nineteenth-century view of fugue, no longer directs the form. It is the nurturing root which has been removed, leaving only "a certain traditional quality, a merely formal essence." It is, in other words, more emblematic than meaningful, representative if not of the archaic, then at least of the formal and austere. The change in status of fugue as art work meant the loss of the varied and wide-ranging expressive possibilities, which according to Hauptmann characterized the eighteenth-century fugue. It has been reduced to the status of a topic. Fugue became equal to structure: a particular kind of pure, classic structure that reflected the devotion of master craftsmanship when compared to the overt emotionalism of the Romantic Charakterstück. The emotive force of fugue lay in its oxymoronical nature: a virtuosic display of restraint.

Thus Hauptmann, and those who followed
him, were unable to locate the expressive content of
the fugue without recourse to its formal/topical
significance. They were left with a hierarchy that
exactly reversed the one that supposedly governed the
musical form of "living" works. Instead of the content
directing the form, the form is the content. Thus in
greater and greater measure the expressiveness of
fugue had to be located in its technical and formal
achievement. The more impressive the complexity
and symmetry revealed by a fugue, the better it was at
fulfilling the designated topical role of the genre and
the more suitable a symbol it became for composi­
tional skill and deep philosophical asceticism.

The "form as content" reduction, of course,
places the shifting fate of fugue, and with it The Art of
Fugue, squarely within the new aesthetic boundaries
being drawn by the mid-nineteenth century.
Hauptmann's Erläuterungen preceded Wagner's use of
the phrase "absolute music" by a scant five years and
by 1854 Eduard Hanslick had standardized the equa­
tion of form and content in The Beautiful in Music.
One suspects, however, that Hanslick, supposed
father of pure formalist analysis but still a romantic
critic, would find most recent analyses of The Art of
Fugue dry as dust. His warning to his own readers
about the affective nature of music in general echoes
those offered by so many regarding The Art of Fugue
specifically.

This spiritual content thus combines, in the soul of the
listener, the beautiful in music with all other great and
beautiful ideas. He does not experience music merely as
bare and absolute through its own beauty, but simulta­
nceously as a sounding image of the great movements of
the universe. Through deep and secret relationships to
nature the meaning of tones is heightened far beyond
the tones themselves, and allows us always to feel the
infinite even as we listen to the work of human tal-
ent.13

This symbiosis of the formal and the affective,
however, proved especially difficult for analysts of
fugues to come to terms with and the ambiguous aes-
thetic status of the genre became a popular topic
among journal writers. Hauptmann's views provided
the model for most. A critic for the American Dwight's
Journal of Music took up the issue in 1867, writing that
"The grand question is: What is the true position of
the fugue in the world of musical art?"14 His answer
provides a striking connection between Hauptmann's
emergent nineteenth-century conception of fugue as a
redundant aggregate of topical allusions and the
extreme reification of the same ideas in August Halm's
early twentieth-century formalist theory.15 The
Dwight's Journal author, as suits the broader pattern of
Art of Fugue criticism, is at first careful to single out
the fugues of Bach as an exception.

Let it be understood that, throughout this paper, we
understand by the term fugue the fugue in its highest
development, which it received only at the hand of
Bach; for the fugues of this Master are, we think, more
individual and more free than others, and approach
more nearly to the ideal of the fugue.

Predictably, however, his treatment of Bach is full of
maddening contradictions.

The fugues of Bach do have well-marked individualities
of emotional tone. But they do none of them suggest
distinct emotional states, or impress us, and elevate or
depress the emotional condition of the listener to con-
sonance with themselves, so decidedly as do many
other works—certain of Beethoven's Sonatas, for
instance.


27, no. 15 (12 October 1867).

15. August Halm, *Von Zwei Kulturen Der Musik* (Munich: G. Muller, 1913;
Ultimately the aesthetic potential of fugue is reduced to a collective identity in a set of formal processes repeated ad infinitum.

Fugues are grand. Even the easy ones awaken impressions of power. They are restless, and when they cease it is not from an apparent fitness of necessary conclusion reached, but rather of arbitrary pause. For a fugue when "played, is not played out." You are conscious of no reason why it might not go on indefinitely—or at least, as long as the counterpoint "holds out."

The process need not end, because process is the entire purpose of the piece. Compared to the sonata, which for Hegelian critics served as the testing ground for the form-content dialectic, the fugue has no synthesis to reach. Its development is therefore not goal-directed, but potentially endless, and aimless.

A sonata is a grand soul-picture. A Fugue is a grand piece of work. It may be a soul picture, too. But it is of a soul that is restless, striving after infinite development—a worthy strife, after all; a Becoming, a never Is.... The grand task of the sonata is, to convey "ideas of beauty," of the fugue, "ideas of power and relation." It follows, therefore...that the fugue is truly "less noble than other forms of musical art, in so far as it expresses less" of soul "than they".... When one would seek to convince us of the wonderful amount of emotional expression and spirituality that is latent therein, we are reminded of the just remark of the poet, that "optics sharp 'twould take, I ween, To see a thing that can't be seen."16

The distinction made here between the fugues of Bach and the sonatas of Beethoven—the former infinite and aimless, thus in a sense infinitely static, and the latter dynamic and teleological—presages remarkably Halm's 1913 formulation in which the same genres are selected to represent an antithetical pair of "musical cultures." For Halm, however, the

16. The italics are Mathew's. "The poet" is John Trumbull, and the final two lines are a popular aphorism from his 1774 satire McFingal.
primacy of formal considerations ultimately provides for a dramatic outlet: the fugue is interpreted as an explication of a theme/character and the sonata as the movement through a form toward a preordained conclusion/fate. Still, as it had been since Hauptmann, the dynamic movement through form in the sonata, a fundamental element in the development of narrative or programmatic readings, is denied to fugue as a genre.

Given this, the traditionally conflicted status of *The Art of Fugue* becomes less of a mystery. And it follows, from the perspective of the nineteenth- and still many twentieth-century critics, that if one claims *The Art of Fugue* to be a great, or an ambitious, or a monumental collection of fugues, then one has already, by the very definition of the genre, limited its significance to that of an emblem of austerity, formalism, and a classicist’s ideal of processual preeminence. A question that remains, however, is why such caution about the art of fugueing in the mid-nineteenth century has remained so pervasive as regards *The Art of Fugue* in the twentieth. Why, while so many have seen fit to warn against a narrowly technical view of *The Art of Fugue*, have so few seen fit to carry its critical reception beyond a discussion of its representative generic—albeit extreme generic—properties, namely its formal complexity and supposed exhaustiveness of thematic development? An answer to this may lie in an examination of the only school of criticism that sought to answer Hilgenfeldt’s call for an aesthetics of *The Art of Fugue* by openly and comprehensively searching out the “deep and secret relationships,” to borrow Hanlsick’s phrase, between the structure of the tones and the structure of the universe.
**THE ART OF FUGUE AND NATIONALIST AESTHETICS**

If the mainstream of The Art of Fugue's critical reception, from Hilgenfeldt to Bitsch and beyond, is characterized by either reticence concerning the specifics of its emotional content or outright denial of any such expressive layer, then one is well advised to pay particular attention to those analyses that break with this tradition. Philipp Spitta was, perhaps, the first to take up Hilgenfeldt's challenge. Spitta not only claimed that The Art of Fugue contained an emotional element and that, in fact, the purpose of the collection was expressive rather than abstract, but he also provided some specific analysis of this emotional content.

Spitta picks up almost exactly on Hilgenfeldt's critique, claiming that the work has too long been considered exclusively as a collection of individual exercises, "a method of treatment which would have shown off each fugue by itself."

It must, according to Spitta, be understood as a whole, as a complete work in which an overall aesthetic and emotive design coexists perfectly with scientific or pedagogical intent: "The practical and educational purpose and the free artistic ideal are so inseparable here, at the highest point of their development, that there is scarcely a trace of any compromise, or sacrifice of the highest demands of one factor, in favor of the other."

It was, as Hilgenfeldt had predicted, the favoring of one over the other that had produced a critical tradition devoid of expression, a tradition that was an obstacle to understanding The Art of Fugue as what Spitta would consider living, feeling music.

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18. Ibid., 199. The obscure state in which it has hitherto lain has
rendered this task all the harder, and it has thus come about that a composition of incomparable perfection and depth of feeling, although it has always been mentioned with especial reverence as being Bach's last great work, has never yet formed part of the life of the German nation.¹⁹

Spitta's renewed call to engage in interpretive analysis of The Art of Fugue would, and still can, serve as a rallying point for anyone who would hope to broaden the critical engagement with its expressive content. For Spitta's reading is one of the most salient moments in the reception history of the work, a moment around which, despite Marcel Bitsch's complaint, a substantial tradition of emotional and metaphysical interpretation indeed arose in Germany in the decades immediately before and during the Third Reich.

The roots of a nationalist view of fugue in general and The Art of Fugue in particular stretch back well into the nineteenth century. Fugue was, for Hauptmann, the form which more than any other separated the German from the Italian and French traditions. It stood in his system of aesthetics as an antidote to the relative weightlessness of the sonata form at its most "Italianate."

The energy of the Germanic period was not confined within the limits of Germany; Italy, the classic land, received from us the Gothic style and the Fugue, for the fugue is to music what the Gothic style is to architecture, the Sonata corresponding in form to the Hellenic. But neither Cathedral nor fugue could endure in a soil foreign to their nature; they enlarged their area, they acquired breadth, and lost height. By degrees, our enthusiasm lost its energy, and we experienced a reaction from Italy. Architectural forms, debased by the Romans, found acceptance; the German fugue made way for the Italian sonata... The sonata admits of more intrinsic beauty, but it has not the depth of the fugue.²⁰

¹⁹. Ibid., 203.
In this one passage we see Hauptmann’s aesthetic theories run headlong into the nationalist sentiments that would come to dominate the interpretive history of The Art of Fugue in the first part of the twentieth century. For if fugue, as Hauptmann himself had so astutely pointed out, had been reduced to the status of a topic, a reference point for structural integrity, organic growth, and classicism, so had it become inextricably bound to those same ideals as they wrapped themselves in the cloak of German “depth,” a topic, in effect, of “Germanness.” Holly Watkins has discussed this process as revealed in the work of Hauptmann’s Hegelian contemporary A.B. Marx.

Marx’s widely read tirades, which are laden with the dichotomies inward vs. outward, deep vs. superficial, spiritual vs. sensual, instrumental music vs. opera, and German vs. Italian and French, bequeathed to later generations of analysts the notion that finding depth in music—even doing analysis itself—was an exercise in how to be German.21

Similarly, it was to “the life of the German nation” that Spitta offered his poetic version of The Art of Fugue. Some fifty years later Wolfgang Graeser offered his own orchestrated edition and performances in order to rectify a wrong against the German identity.

The disgrace of our having allowed such a valuable treasure of our nation to fall into shameful forgetfulness, left out of three quarters of a century of German music, is not erased. The German Folk, in this time of enslavement and inward and outward poverty, should reflect on their greatest world-historical spirits.22

Graeser’s edition and performances provided
the strongest impetus for a new school of *Art of Fugue* interpretation to emerge in Germany. Its connection to the social landscape is undeniable, the movement reaching its apex in the 1930s with publications, such as Richard Benz’s *Bachs Geistiges Reich*, in which it becomes unclear how to separate the romantic from the nationalist, the neoplatonic from the propagandistic. Even a simple proclamation of the composer’s alleged abstract intent becomes bound up in the metaphysical.

And thus Bach’s spiritual kingdom appears finally and most perfectly before all the world as a mathematics of the Cosmos, a legitimation of the boundless, which a great thinker has shown to us in ever new combinations and worldly possibilities. The *Art of Fugue* is thus hardly a human monument any longer. It is deeply symbolic that here the pure thinker fails to specify the earthly instrument: possibilities for earthly realization he left to others.23

It is the nature of nationalism that it is proprietary regarding such concepts as the universal, the subjective, the profound. And indeed, the emotional content breathed into the reception history of *The Art of Fugue* in the 1920s and 30s was expressly designed to position the work as a statement of a universal metaphysics which captures in its unfolding the essence of the will to power. Erich Schwebsch refers to the main theme of the collection as “Die Urwille für Schöpfung,” and describes the whole work as follows:

An entelechy flows through its bindings and each phase becomes an individual fate-weaving; and the whole leads finally to a world-tableau; the tonal biography of the Urgedanke [the main theme] through a tremendous cycle of an entire world-evolution.24


Schwebsch is an interesting figure and one whom I do not intend to brand as a Reich musicologist. His study of The Art of Fugue bookends the regime in its first two printings (1931 and 1946) and contains none of the racial theory that marks much of the official propaganda among Reich scholars. His spiritual allegiances, however, being to the doctrines of Rudolph Steiner and his Anthroposophist movement, are not untainted. Post-war studies have reexamined Steiner's theories of metaphysical transcendence both in terms of their racial hierarchizing and their strong nationalist mythology.  

It is telling, then, that Schwebsch's 1931 monograph and the introduction to his 1937 edition of The Art of Fugue should stand as the most highly developed of the metaphysical school of Bach interpretations. Whatever his personal aims, it is undeniable that in 1931, Schwebsch's reading provided, in the form of a "tremendous cycle of world-evolution," the antidote to the "enslavement and inward and outward poverty" that Graeser had hoped to counter with his performances. It could not fail to resonate with the main stream of nationalist propaganda. The desire of the musicological bureaucracy of the Reich to establish Bach as the spiritual center of the German canon is well documented and Schwebsch's metaphysical narrative of the emergence of an unspoiled Urseele must be seen in the light of its time.

In placing Schwebsch's study at the center of what I will call the German metaphysical school I do not intend simply to indict its political mission, stated or unstated, intended or accidental. Rather, I will use his reading to illustrate how narrow is the range of

25. For example, see Ernst Bloch, The Heritage of Our Times, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (German edition, Frankfurt: Surkamp, 1962; translation, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 174-78; Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience, Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, eds. (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995). That Schwebsch's study found its way back into print in 1988 should not be taken as evidence of its acceptance by the musicological community, as the new edition was published by Freies Geistesleben, the publishing house of the Waldorf Schools, the present-day proprietors of Rudolph Steiner's thought.

meanings offered by the narrative tropes of twentieth-century analysis and how inescapably both listener and critic can be drawn into their gravitational compass. My own initial response to the work, coupled with those of Spitta and Schwebsch, reveals the difficulty of separating the analytical processes employed in authoritarian narratives from those that would serve anyone attempting a programmatic, narrative, or hermeneutic reading, even today. As we shall see, Spitta's reading of what he considers the cycle's climax, while it is hardly laden with the overt social mythologies of the German metaphysical school, is nevertheless compatible with its underlying metaphorical basis. As a listener and an analyst, I myself tended—rather automatically and uncritically in retrospect—to order certain of the fugues into a similar teleological narrative of events, even as I consciously sought to avoid a programmatic reading.

Regardless of whether the "world evolution" or "mathematics of the cosmos" perceived by the critic is spiritual, social, or merely aesthetic, the underlying narrative is the same. Ultimately, given the reliance of a nationalist interpretation on such basic concepts as depth, coherence, and the causal relation of events leading to dénouement, metaphorically understood as transcendence or overcoming, it proves quite difficult to produce a satisfying reading of these fugues (especially numbers 8-11) that does not play on a set of rhetorical or dramatic criteria that readily collapse back into the ideals of German nationalism.

Is this an analytical shortcoming, a critical one, or a moral one? There can be no strictly theoretical answer to this question, in so far as not only the
work but also the analytical systems through which we understand the work are subject to a constant process of recontextualization. Analytical systems are a product, and a reflection, of value systems and no value system is free of the potential for abuse. All analyses, and therefore all artworks, are pervertible. This is a truism so prosaic as hardly to be worth such a pronouncement. It is, however, a slippery cliché, whose full potential many have overlooked, leading to the basic ideological blindness of pure formalism and to the evacuation of potential meanings from a work like The Art of Fugue. Richard Taruskin has defined this process of “decontextualization” as the twentieth-century’s central myth, that of formalism “seen as a bulwark” against the “intolerable implications” uncovered by historical contextualization.27

Herein may lie the answer to the riddle that still plagued Bitsch in 1967, namely why critics remained so averse to interpretations that went beyond a cataloging of contrapuntal techniques. As Joseph Kerman would put it yet another eighteen years later in 1985, “Bach research has for some time been poised on the brink of the classic positivist dilemma: more and more facts, and less and less confidence in interpreting them.”28 It becomes less surprising, however, that a generation of scholars who lived through the war would turn away from a discursive analysis tainted by the metaphysics of authoritarianism and resign themselves to the more positivistic issues of reevaluating the sources.29 In this case, the


29. The same passage is cited by Jeffrey L. Prater in his “translator’s forward” to the English language edition of Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, J.S. Bach’s *The Art of Fugue*: The Work and Its Interpretation (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 7. Eggebrecht’s study, which appeared in German in the same year as Kerman’s book, can be considered one of a very few partial exceptions to what I am calling the “reticent mainstream”; it picks up on the imagery of the German metaphysical school, if with a more cautious tone. While he does not develop a comprehensive hermeneutic reading of the cycle, or a very detailed one of its individual parts, Eggebrecht does consider the use of musical affect, rhetorical figures, and number symbols, attempting to
nineteenth-century view of the fugue-topic discussed above provides a convenient veil, a historical precedent for the denial of both expression and the potential for corruption. Little mention, little "use" that is, has been made of the techniques of the German metaphysical school since the end of the war.\textsuperscript{30} Such a "grand piece of work" as a collection of fugues is, after all, less potentially troubling than the "grand soul-picture" of the sonata. Accordingly, the issue of the meaning of \textit{The Art of Fugue} has settled into harmless reflections over whether it arises out of the progressive complexity of contrapuntal techniques or of fugal types.\textsuperscript{31}

Confining these few observations to a contemporary eighteenth-century discursive/theological vocabulary. At times, he is on the verge of betraying a grand Schwebschian view of the whole, as in the following passage:

Contrapunctus XI is one of Bach's most texturally dense fugues, but at the same time, also one of his most expressive. This fugue creates the distinct impression that something "full of life" is being placed into a world of "sighing." It expresses "the difficult walk," and communicates a sense of "restlessness and fear"... The "I" (Bach) seeks union with the Tonic (God) on the ground of mercy alone.

I find most of Eggebrecht's observations on expressive content, underdeveloped as they remain, immediately appealing, and therefore as personally disconcerting, as I did many of Schwebsch's. Eggebrecht's unsure tone when dealing with expression does not pass unnoticed by his translator:

The reticence with which Eggebrecht approaches his preface and maintains to some degree throughout the entire book, seems to corroborate Kerman's view that "distrust of interpretation is programmatic among the traditional German Bach scholars." This point was somewhat underscored when, in a letter to me, Eggebrecht seemed almost astonished that there was enough interest in this kind of interpretive study to produce a translation.

\textsuperscript{30} The one other exception, Erich Bergel's \textit{Johann Sebastian Bach, Die Kunst der Fuge: Ihre geistige Grundlage im Zeichen der thematischen Bipolarität} (Bonn: Brockhaus, 1980), takes over wholesale much of Schwebsch's reading, essentially expanding and reworking the thematic conflict that, we shall see, lies at its heart. Quite tellingly, Bergel is mystified by the failure of the scholarly community to follow up on the critical advances of Schwebsch's generation (see pp. 3-4), a textbook example of the sort of ideological blindness that results from failing to historicize the critical reception of a work along with its musical text.

\textsuperscript{31} Christoph Wolff, \textit{Bach: Essays on his Life and Music} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 265-281. This is the heart of Wolff's published thoughts on the \textit{The Art of Fugue}, which reflect on the separate versions of the work that result from a contemplation or performance of the Berlin manuscript—ordered by increasing complexity of counterpoint: simple, double, triple, quadruple—versus the first printed edition—ordered by different fugal techniques: simple fugues, counterfugues, fugues on more than one subject. Wolff's analysis is all the more interesting as it lays the foundation for two different competing texts, each potentially sustaining a different autonomous expressive reading. As is the tradition, however, it remains at this foundational level, much to the dismay of those who would accept as valid Kerman's criticism of Bach scholarship.
To continue in the mode of the mainstream of The Art of Fugue’s reception, however, is not only to deny an expressive or hermeneutic layer to The Art of Fugue, but to refuse to distinguish between “perverted” and “pervertible.” One does not need to evacuate The Art of Fugue of its expressive and narrative potential in order to renounce the uses to which this potential has been put. To the contrary, to “unperson” the historical legacy of The Art of Fugue denies the historical contingency, as well as the pervertibility, of our own analytical systems, thus of our own value systems. This is an ideological bias that will do as great a disservice to us in the eyes of future historians as does Schwebrecht’s in the eyes of the present generation.

Thus, I do not wish to bury The Art of Fugue or to deny the validity of hermeneutic analysis, both of which remain dear to me as a listener and essential to me as a historian. Rather, I hope to bring to the surface those aspects of my own listening experience that draw upon the font of metaphors and narrative tropes both taintable by and, I hope, salvageable from their past.

A strong current of recent scholarship has already emerged which makes surveying the values underlying our narrative analytical tendencies easier.32 A new problem emerges, then, which deals specifically with a listener’s “gut reactions,” those sensations that give to the music what Scott Burnham has called its “sense of being compellingly involving.”33 This “compellingness,” for Western listeners, involves just those musical styles that can be effectively discussed in the language of dramatic or hermeneutic analysis. Burnham has explored how late nineteenth-century,


33. Burnham, Beethoven Hero, 29.
predominantly German, ideology gave rise to our analytical systems and privileged musical styles that conform to their narratives of transcendence. In a similar vein, Pamela Potter has highlighted the shared ancestry of “Nazi musicology” and just plain (or at least just plain American) musicology.

While American musicology is by no means a direct descendant of the musicological manifestations of Nazi ideology, the two do share common roots in the German intellectual tradition that gave rise to the discipline of musicology.34

In a discipline that places a heavy emphasis on the metaphors used to explain the “compellingness” of music, this common ancestry inevitably resulted not only in the intersection of the narrative archetypes of the late nineteenth century with those of the period during and around the Third Reich, but also steadfastly preserves elements of both in our own present-day listening habits.

Some of the most important musical/dramatic principles of the German metaphysical school can be gleaned just from looking at Graeser’s edition. One immediately notes two aspects of his ordering and scoring that conform well to the analytical criteria of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as outlined by Burnham. The first of these principles is end-weightedness. According to Burnham, “modern” musical analysis from Marx, to Riemann, to Schenker and beyond was initially developed as a means of explaining the narrative trajectory, the temporal pull, felt by those who listened to the works of Beethoven’s middle period. Such temporally derived systems placed a heavy emphasis on the end of the work: in a

chain of causally related, developmental events, the end came to define the process, representing the moment of transcendence or completion. Graeser’s orchestration exemplifies this process as it was designed to enhance the effect of *The Art of Fugue* in performance. He divides the work into halves, each governed by an additive process in which the instrumental forces gradually increase in both weight and referentiality. The first half, for instance, consisting of the first eleven fugues, is orchestrated as follows:

- **Contrapunctus I**: string quartet (2 violins, viola, cello)
- **Contrapunctus II**: string quartet (violin, viola, 2 cellos)
- **Contrapunctus III**: string quartet (2 violins, 2 cellos)
- **Contrapunctus IV**: string quartet (2 violins, viola, cello)
- **Contrapunctus V**: small string orchestra (with tutti and soli)
- **Contrapunctus VI**: small string orchestra
- **Contrapunctus VII**: small string orchestra
- **Contrapunctus VIII**: string orchestra, trumpets, trombones, organ
- **Contrapunctus IX**: woodwinds, solo and tutti (oboe, oboe da caccia, bassoons)
- **Contrapunctus X**: string orchestra, flutes, oboes, bassoons
- **Contrapunctus XI**: string orchestra, woodwinds, trumpets, trombones and organ

As Schwebsch would and Spitta already had, Graeser organizes the first half of the work into successive phases, each growing in breadth and representational significance. The first two phases offer merely a growth in size from string quartet to string orchestra. It is the final four fugues, eight to eleven, that provide the end-weightedness demanded by nineteenth and twentieth century perspectives on musical narrative. The immediate addition of trumpets, trombones and organ to an enlarged string orchestra signals a

shift both in size and theological allusion, the trumpets signaling a heavenly height and the trombones and organ a greater solemnity. The effect was apparently successful—reports of the performances focused on their quasi-religious significance. Felix Strossinger called the performance “a religious service in itself,” and Hugo Lohmann heard the name Bach emerge in Contrapunctus XI “like one of the saints.” Indeed, it is not until Contrapunctus XI, which ends the first half of the program, that the full orchestra and organ sound in unison. The second half of Graeser’s program follows suit, growing from solo harpsichord to an ensemble of flute, oboe da caccia and bassoon, to two harpsichords, and again, in the final phase of three fugues (including the incomplete final fugue ending with the reemergence of the Bach theme) adding trumpets, trombones, organ and woodwinds. The performance ended with the organ chorale played by organ alone, the sacred ascension of Benz’s “pure thinker” from the human plane into his geistiges Reich.

By ending the first half of his performance with a climax on Contrapunctus XI, Graeser is in line with another common element of The Art of Fugue’s reception. Of all the collection, it is Contrapunctus XI that has provoked the most thoughtful treatment of expressive content, even among those who do not see aesthetic value in much of the collection. As it is the center of Graeser’s edition, so it is at the heart of Schwebsch’s analysis. Schwebsch identifies the defining and most salient moment of the entire piece at measure 91 of Contrapunctus XI, the moment when the fugue’s third subject spells out the notes B♭.
A, C, and B♭, the Bach theme that for Schwebsch represented the Ichgeburt, the birth of the subject and the power of the great artist’s will (in this case the greatest German artist). Schwebsch thus places Contrapunctus XI at the center of what he considered Bach’s theological/aesthetic thought. For him Contrapunctus XI is “no longer a mere fugue, but an entire ordered, intricately interlaced cosmos, which links the diverse threads of the great web in the inexorable consequence of a single final image [Abschlüßbilde].”37 In fact, without the eleventh fugue, Schwebsch’s reading becomes impossible. As we shall see, it is the motivic relationships in this fugue and its accompanying harmonic build-up that provide the analytical basis for a metaphorical reading of the entire collection as the story of “an entire world-evolution.”

The favoring of the eleventh fugue is not, however, an exclusively German phenomenon. Donald Francis Tovey, whose Companion to the Art of Fugue confines itself almost exclusively to a discussion of the technical elements of the work (perhaps among the first to react against the German metaphysical school), cannot keep himself from the thought that perhaps this fugue is the end of The Art of Fugue. “It is a majestic and gorgeous movement which improves on acquaintance.... It is even possible that [Bach] had at first thought that this fugue would complete his scheme; and that all that follows is the result of his disappointment.”38

Even C. Hubert Parry who famously, and to his own detriment, derided The Art of Fugue,39 saved his only kind words, and very telling ones indeed, for the eleventh fugue.


38. Donald Francis Tovey, A Companion to “The Art of Fugue” (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 31.

39. C. Hubert H. Parry, Johann Sebastian Bach: The Story of the Development of a Great Personality (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910), 529. Parry saw the whole cycle as a disappointing compromise in which the pedantic outweighed the expressive, an example of Bach’s “...[resorting] to a display of superb skill to justify the work of art which had to be produced under uninspiring conditions...and in this way the aptitude for producing abstract works of art which had no reference to specially interesting ends was engendered.”
The fugue which stands as no. II is of great and salient interest, standing with fugue 8 by reason of much higher musical interest than the rest of the series. In most of the other fugues Bach either determined to restrain himself from the use of beautiful and characteristic ideas, and to write as mechanically as his habits allowed, or else he was quite out of his wonted musical humour. But here the native impulse was too much for him and fugue no. XI is worthy to stand beside the fugues in the "Wohltemperirtes Clavier" for spaciousness of development, depth and consistency of expression, and constant growth of interest from first to last...always maintaining a noble and tender colour and a rather pathetic vein of sentiment. The richness and consistency of the texture throughout are as wonderful as they are spontaneous, and even where the three subjects occur simultaneously the uninitiated would perceive only a singularly beautiful piece of expressive music.40

It is the end of this remarkable paragraph that is most interesting. Parry implies that the eleventh fugue succeeds in overcoming the Hauptmannian compromise of "form as content" and that the effect of the piece can be felt even by the listener unaware of the structural, fugal element. The presumption of an immediate visceral reaction on the part of listeners unschooled in fugal technique but well schooled in romanticism demands scrutiny. I myself have experienced this reaction to the eleventh fugue and so, I would guess, have many of my readers. It is, of course, exactly those reactions that seem the most natural or automatic to us that need to be investigated in full consciousness of the long and burdened history which gave rise to them. This is especially the case if one wishes to rehabilitate The Art of Fugue as a work of expressive power without falling uncritically into a replication of the archetypal topoi of past ideologies. 40. Ibid., 525.
Having made my own confession, I am obliged to take these critics and listeners at their word and locate the nexus of the expressive potential of *The Art of Fugue* exactly where even its most reticent critics have found it in the past. A further exploration of the eleventh fugue is therefore warranted as a first step toward understanding *The Art of Fugue* in terms of meanings that stretch beyond the solemn appreciation of its structural designs.

**CONTRAPUNCTUS ELEVEN**

Spitta’s analysis, while relatively terse, provides a good deal of room for expansion. He begins with the assertion that *The Art of Fugue* is both more emotionally uniform and of greater emotive depth than *The Well-Tempered Clavier* or the inventions and sinfonias. Spitta claims further that this uniformity is experienced by the listener through a series of emotional climaxes, similar to the “individual phases” that weave a “world tableau” at the center of Schwebsch’s reading. Spitta writes,

> The inner development of the work is in a sequence of grand, majestic groups.... In the third group (fugues 8-11) external and internal elements combine to attain the climax. The principal subject is now associated with independent and contrasting themes.\(^{41}\)

For Spitta, a series of new themes represent the “external elements” emerging in these four fugues to interact with the principal subject. To him, and to almost every other analyst of the work, the principal subject of *The Art of Fugue* is marked by its emotive austeri-
Example 1. The Art of Fugue's *Hauptthema*

This reserved topical identity of the *Hauptthema* is challenged by the evocative referentiality of the other themes, which Spitta describes as follows:

The eighth fugue begins at once with a subject of this kind, which glides in with stealthy, snake-like windings, and is full of peculiar individuality in both rhythm and in melody. After it has been thoroughly worked out, a second and very agitated theme, not less important in rhythm and melody, accompanies it. A double fugue is thus produced, in which the strange little taps, as it were, in the second theme, increase to hammer beats, and the animated movement to violence of unrest. 43

Example 2. Contrapunctus VIII, subjects 1 and 2

The overall effect of this interaction is a modification of the character and intent of the original theme, enforced on the listener by process of memory and association.

...and it is not till the original quiet movement has been restored that the chief subject enters and is treated fugally. But disjuncted as it is by crotchet rests, it also conveys an impression of inward agitation.

Spitta’s analysis of the eleventh fugue is less specific, relying mainly on its position as the last of this group of four, the logical culmination of a developmental progress toward a climax. The eleventh fugue, then, is a revisitation of the thematic confrontations in Contrapunctus VIII, with all three combatants again represented. The eighth fugue initiated, for Spitta, a narrative momentum, a process that requires a causal connection to be found between its events and those that follow it. The idea that the eleventh fugue is a logical and imperative continuation of the eighth can be gleaned from Spitta’s reading of the tenth fugue, whose purpose is characterized as something of a transition, a middle movement.

Its mild and flowing character is felt as repose after what has gone before, and it prepares us for the full appreciation of the last fugue, in which the three themes of the eighth fugue are worked out again, but in four parts, which intensifies their expression to the last degree and entirely exhausts their harmonic capabilities.44

Spitta’s analysis proves to have been the starting point for Schwebsch’s understanding of the eleventh fugue. Conflating the two readings can tell us much about which features of the music have

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44. Ibid., 200.
attracted the narrative ear of romantic critics. One is well served to revisit the work of both Burnham and Anthony Newcomb to clarify the process by which musical features can compel or demand that a listener engage his sense of memory and hear the unfolding of the piece as a directed series of causally related events. According to Burnham, forward momentum is the primary metaphor by which listeners have been taught to string musical events together and the pieces that have been most successfully “treated” by analysis are exactly those that conform most readily to this metaphorical ordering. They are based on what he calls “moments of salience,” crux points whose expanded potential for referentiality allows the listener to structure a story around them. As Burnham writes, “Conspicuously dramatic features in the music must be heard to issue from the past and to be decisive for the future; they must inspire an intense degree of involvement in a recognizable yet experientially individual temporal process.”

Chief among these events is the evocative development of thematic material. In his analysis of Contrapunctus VIII, Spitta outlines one of the most common means used by nineteenth-century critics to order musical events as narrative: assigning an identity to a motive or theme and “reading” its subsequent appearances as progressive and developmental. Newcomb has referred to this analytical procedure as being akin to the narrative archetype of the Bildungsroman, a trajectory which traces the alteration of the world-view of a single central character (in this case the Art of Fugue theme itself) by means of a series of confrontations with contrasting characters (here the new themes whose presence serves to “dissever”

45. Burnham, Beethoven Hero, 29.
Thus the eleventh fugue represents the continuation of a process that works effectively on the desire of the hermeneutic analyst to find cause/effect relationships. The *Hauptthema* had been challenged and altered by its interaction with two chromatic subjects, which both Spitta and Schwebsch characterize as snakelike. Through its struggle to emerge from the texture of the eighth fugue, the *Hauptthema* is “dissolved.” Its altered state in the final section of that fugue serves as the crux point for Contrapunctus VIII and paves the way for a deeper metaphorical reading of Contrapunctus XI. The latter begins with the *rectus* of the *Hauptthema* still in the rhythmic guise it assumed at the end of Contrapunctus VIII. For Schwebsch this places the listener in the midst of an process of evolution, a figurative survival of the fittest.

A new theme builds up harshly and rigorously upon the *terse rectus* of the *Urthema* in its rhythmically altered sequence...from the second section [of the eighth fugue] and in the granite block of D minor there arises the first section of this mighty structure.

The “granite block” Schwebsch refers to is the relatively stable and predictable exposition of the first subject in the opening 27 measures. The pages that follow will describe the broad dramatic crescendo that represents, for Schwebsch, a metaphysical emergence of the will of the subject through a renewed confrontation with chromaticism and thematic ambiguity.

The second section brings agility with the inversion of the eighth fugue’s “serpent theme.” Here it sounds out as “Pride.” “Serpent” and “Pride” are transformed into a tone symbol that is also a piece of Bach’s theology and points to the secret of these motivic combinations, which are necessary for the complete *Ichgeburth.*
It is not difficult to pinpoint the musical elements that directed Schwebsch's reading. The pressure and forward trajectory necessary for such a climactic emergence builds from measure 28 to measure 89, through an intensification of chromaticism and a compression of thematic material. After the "granite block" of the tonally static first exposition, a second begins on a new subject (the inversion of the serpentine subject from Contrapunctus VIII). The ascending chromaticism of the second subject [S2] is doubled by a rising chromatic countersubject [CSI], itself mirrored at its tail by another, descending chromatic theme [CS2]. At the same time another motivic counterpart emerges, this one derived from Contrapunctus III [CP]. (Example 4)

Subject 2 [S2]

Countersubject 1 [CSI]

Countersubject 2 [CS2]

Counterpart [CP]

Example 4a. S2, CSI, CS2, CP

Example 4b. Contrapunctus XI, measures 27-32
The opening measures of this second exposition already contain the necessary elements for producing the antagonizing forces at the heart of the Bildungsroman, the sense that something has been "dissevered" and that it must reemerge as something new. The combination of three techniques—a greater concentration of chromatic lines, the piling up of parallel motion, and the compression of thematic material—produces a saturation of dissonance. The long waves of chromatic ascent and descent in mm. 44-60 represent a culminating passage (see Example 5). The first wave occurs across three voices in a nearly unbroken span of two octaves and a sixth from the D\(^3\) of the tenor in m. 44 all the way to the B\(_\flat\)\(^5\) in the soprano at m. 53 (missing are B\(_\flat\)\(^4\) in the alto and G\(_\#\)\(^5\) in the soprano). This is immediately followed by a descent from B\(_\flat\)\(^5\) down to G\(^4\) in m. 58 (missing only the C\(^5\)). The tenor and bass then pick up the descent, with the tenor falling from A\(^3\) to D\(^3\) (mm. 57-59) and the bass from A\(^2\) all the way to C\(^2\), the lowest pitch in the piece (mm. 59-61). This descent is followed three measures later by yet another descent of a tenth between the G\(^4\) of the tenor at m. 64 and the E\(^3\) of the bass at m. 69 (missing the B\(_\flat\)\(^3\)).

Just as important as the chromatic pressure is the convergence of diverse thematic ideas, what Schwebsch calls their "compression." In this section, three of the ideas noted in Example 4a—the second subject [S2], the descending chromatic countersubject [CS2], and the counterpart from Contrapunctus III [CP]—recur in ever denser combinations. The identities or autonomy of these themes, however, is compromised by their increasingly close juxtaposition and
Example 5. Contrapunctus XI, measures 44-60
the blurring of their distinguishing features as chromatic motion increasingly dominates the texture. By measure 57, in the midst of the chromatic descent already mentioned, all three appear piled immediately one on top of another.

\[\text{Example 6. measures 57-58}\]

A third factor in the process of intensification is a thickening texture that becomes more and more reliant on parallel motion as the piece unfolds. Already at m. 28, with the introduction of the second subject, a hint of the close compression of chromatic parallel thirds appears.

\[\text{Example 7. measures 27-30}\]

There is, throughout mm. 44-71, seldom a chromatic line that is not doubled either at the third or the sixth. Close doubling at the third in the left hand can be seen at the start of Example 5 between tenor and bass, and a long sequence of widely spaced
doubling at the tenth between soprano and bass occurs in mm. 54-57. All three of these elements—chromatic motion, thematic compression, and parallel textures—come together at the climax of this phase of the piece in mm. 62-71.

Example 8. measures 62-71

The Contrapunctus III counterpart [CP] is present, doubled in thirds at m. 64 and tenths at mm. 62 and 66. The long chromatic descent [CS2] already mentioned is also doubled, first in the alto at m. 65, then in the soprano at m. 66. The doubling comes to its most intemperate pitch in mm. 68-69, with the chain of parallel chromatic fourths between soprano and alto over subject 2 in the bass, a remarkable textural extreme.

Perhaps most important from the standpoint of thematic development, however, is the entrance of subject 2 [S2] in its original, uninverted form from Contrapunctus VIII in the bass at m. 67. The three chromatic pitches in the subject (here occurring in mm. 68-69) serve not only as part of the subject itself,
but also as the continuation of that long chromatic line, discussed above, that had begun in the tenor at m. 64. This, on top of the chromatic and parallel motion and the stacking of thematic splinters all serve to call into question the autonomy of the separate themes, threatening—and perhaps even succeeding—to turn them into a mash of parallel chromaticism. This thematic conflict, which gives the impression of a causal chain of events that can be described hermeutically, is absolutely essential to Schwebsch’s reading. As Schwebsch’s more general description confirms, such passages foreshadow the treatment that the Hauptthema will receive at the climax of the piece.

They are the artistic preparation of the space in which the BACH symbol can appear. This activity, essential to the entire work, takes place again in the middle part of this fugue. From the depths—carried there by the inverted snake theme—the powerfully pressing BACH figure ascends.49

The appearance of the third subject, a modified inversion of the second subject from Contrapunctus VIII, initiates the final build toward this climax. It is the beginning of the Ichgeburt, a painful and difficult process made up of a compounding of all the elements we have noted thus far: musical birth-contractions. The “Ich” being “geburtd” is found in the stretto entrance of the third subject [S3] in the alto at m. 90, above the tenor’s initial entrance at m. 89.

Whether the notes are an intentional reference or a coincidental result of the subject's chromatic nature (as Tovey has noted, they actually spell out B A C C C H ) is inconsequential to Schwebsch. For him the inference of the composer's name forms the counterpart to the referential potential of the previous subject, the Serpent/Pride tone symbol. What follows in the exposition of this subject is a redoubling of the chromaticism, thematic ambiguity, and parallelism of the previous section. Parallel motion and doubling at the third, as seen in example 7, already play a role in its first entrance. Another type of doubling, that of the rhythmic momentum of the subject being treated, increases from the predominantly quarter-note motion of the second subject to the constant eighth notes of the third. With this increased momentum comes increased distance from the tonic and by m. 145 we have been carried into E minor, one of the most distant tonalities in the whole of The Art of Fugue.

At least one part is doubled in either thirds or sixths almost continuously from m. 117 to m. 143. By m. 130, all four parts have been brought to bear on one melody, the third subject presented in rectus doubled at the sixth between soprano and alto, and inversus, doubled at the third in tenor and bass.

Example 10. measures 129-134
There is a corresponding intensification of thematic compression: in these measures, Bach takes advantage of his triple counterpoint, presenting all three themes in various combinations amidst an ever more stringent texture. The initial statement of the third subject in the tenor and alto at m. 88 was already juxtaposed to the second “serpent” theme in the bass. This combination is repeated by the soprano and alto at m. 94. The Hauptthema appears at m. 101, in the alto, surrounded by fragments of the third subject.

Example II. measures 101-105

It too has been drawn into the conflict, though not for the first time. The Hauptthema made an appearance at m. 71, again treated in exposition, but this time in its inverted, “dissevered” state from Contrapunctus VIII. By m. 101, however, it has become fully immersed in the process which swept the other themes toward mutual immolation in the previous section. It now appears in a texture dominated by chromaticism, and is inundated with the rapid, rising figure of the third subject (see the bass in example 10, m. 132). As Schwebsch writes, the third subject

[rising] urgently upward here from the depths becomes a birth. Insatiably hammering, the BACH figure seizes each form and assimilates it, even pulling, in one moment, the Hauptthema into its chromaticism.50
If the E minor entrance at m. 146 is the most tonally distant point in *The Art of Fugue*, then the moment described here by Schwebch is its most distant point of thematic development. For here, at m. 153, underneath both the *rectus* and *inversus* of the third subject, emerges the recognizable rhythmic pattern of the *Hauptthema* as it exists in this fugue:

![Example 12. measures 153-157](image)

**Example 12. measures 153-157**

It is the place at which the thematic compression no longer only threatens but actually overwhelms the *Hauptthema*, for the pitches are not that of the *Art of Fugue* theme, but rather of a series of chromatic descents, the final incontrovertible merging of the identity of the *Hauptthema* with that of the themes with which it had been struggling. For Schwebch, this means that the principal theme is

Overtaken by the powerful pressure, both from above and from below, and is forced under violent pressure into a four-fold unity with all of the themes. This harsh fugue is “philosophized with the hammer.” The birth of individuality is achieved. The *Ichheit* is the new fundamental element, which now fulfills musically the conclusion of the entire monumental thematic construction.51

For Schwebch, the struggle allows for a comparably placid ending in which the themes coexist and

the dominance of the *Hauptthema* is reconfirmed. (Example 13).

The *Hauptthema* is stated simultaneously in *rectus* and *inversus* in soprano and alto (m. 158) and again in tenor and bass (m. 164). The motivic contour of the Bach subject reappears throughout this section, retaining only a whisper of its former potential for chromatic disunity. By m. 169, it saturates the texture once again. This time, however, it is contained by a placid, non-threatening diatonicism. The piece ends with a lone statement of the *Hauptthema* appearing in the soprano, like the hymn tune in an organ chorale (m. 180). In 1931, however, it provides the musical material necessary to complete Schwebsch’s narrative of Contrapunctus XI with a startling political metaphor of enforced consensus: “It is the struggle for a new order yet to be conquered; the struggle for a reciprocal harmony of the forces toward a new and higher organism.”

This statement again forces me to acknowledge my own conflicted response to this piece, and clarifies one possible rationale for the exceedingly cautious stance taken by so many critics from Tovey to Wolff. For what was presented in this analysis was a confrontation of the analytical language and hermeneutic imagery of Spitta, Schwebsch, and myself. I was at first disturbed to find that, upon moving past the metaphorical surface, my own analysis failed to set itself apart from readings whose ideological frameworks I reject.

Confronting the text of *The Art of Fugue* simultaneously in terms of its expressive potential and its historical legacy entails more than simply applying
the most immediately satisfying analytical criteria to it. It should begin from an understanding of how and why that potential has been limited and channeled by the accrual of its historical reception. From the early nineteenth century, the usefulness of the work has been a point of contention, and the uses to which it has been put in the last two hundred years, the ideologies which have been able to find substantiation in its notes, continue to haunt the text today. The solution of postwar critics, however, the evacuation of all but the coldest technical detail when discussing The Art of Fugue, is insufficient. An even greater danger resides in an uncritical acceptance of culturally ingrained "gut reactions" that continue to rely on a brand of "compellingness" whose full ideological implications no historian can afford to overlook. The twentieth-century history of the work represents both of these tendencies, the former in what I have called the reticent mainstream, and the latter in what I am calling the German metaphysical school. Surveying the history of the analytical, aesthetic, and dramatic techniques which have been brought to bear upon The Art of Fugue reveals both the criteria of expression that continue to hold a position of privilege today and the inclination to focus exclusively on those works which conform to them. A critical and historical view of the text is one that not only acknowledges but also contextualizes the immediate visceral reaction of some listeners to Contrapunctus XI as a testimony of the Western classical inheritance of the analytical systems and, even still today, the cultural ideals of the nineteenth century. It is an inheritance of which we are suspicious, and rightly so—a complicated set of lega-
cies that, exactly because they are based in a set of culturally ingrained biases, must be exposed and investigated, for the more ominous echoes of our past can only gain potency from an unwillingness to acknowledge them.