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ON BWV1080/8: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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The application of rhetoric to music had special significance in the seventeenth century and in the first half of the eighteenth century. The discipline of classical Greek oratory, originally dealing with how to make and execute a speech, formed the basis for the rules of composition and performance, especially in German-speaking lands. During this period the influence of rhetorical principles on all parameters of music was commonplace; not only did a vast number of treatises on rhetoric in music emerge,[1] but the central educational programme taught in the Latin schools and the universities included both *musica* and *rhetorica* among the seven *artes liberales*.[2] That rhetoric was also a fundamental part of Bach's music-making is shown by the following testimony from Johann Abraham Birnbaum (1702–1748), Professor of Poetics and Rhetoric at Leipzig: 'He so perfectly understood the resemblance which the performance of a musical piece has in common with rhetorical art that he was listened to with the utmost satisfaction and pleasure when he discoursed of the similarity and agreement between them; but we also wonder at the skilful use he made of this in his works'.[3]

Rhetoric as a discipline was divided into different categories that related to composition and performance, of which the number, depending on the author, could vary. The most standardized plan consisted of five categories: *inventio* (invention of an idea), *dispositio* (arrangement of that idea into the parts of an oration, the organization of the structure), *decoratio* (the filling-in of the details, the stylistic embellishment), *memoria* (studying of the text) and *executio* (instructions for a good performance).[4]

In this essay I want to discuss, on the basis of Contrapunctus 8 from *Die Kunst der Fuge*, BWV1080, the interaction between various aspects of composition and performance. My observations are twofold, and both concern the relationship between *decoratio* and *executio*. On the one hand, I will show how the baroque concept of metre controls the performer's (as well as the composer's) decisions in the realm of articulation. On the other hand, observations will be made about how the *decoratio* of Bach's counterpoint emphasizes structure, and helps the player to clarify the *dispositio* in performance.

One of the characteristic features of baroque scores is the rather limited use they make of articulation marks. However, this does not imply that this music is not meant to be articulated; on the contrary, articulation was considered a crucial part of the *executio*. The guidelines for articulation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were acquired via musical training and were based on the concept of 'good' and

1 For a complete survey of all treatises on rhetoric in music see the monumental study by Gerardus De Swerts, *Musurgia Rhetorica: Studien zur Affektenlehre des Barock* (Antwerp and Cologne: author, 1984).

2 The seven *artes liberales*, the liberal arts, were subdivided into the *trivium*, consisting of *grammatica*, *dialectica* and *rhetorica*, and the *quadrivium*, consisting of *mathematica*, *geometria*, *astronomia* and *musica*.

3 English translation in Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (New York: Dover, 1992), volume 2, 238. Original version in *Bach-Dokumente II – Fremdschriftliche und gedruckte Dokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs 1685–1750*, ed. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1969), 352. Bach was also familiar with the following treatises specifically dealing with rhetoric and music: *Praecepta der musicalischen Composition* (1708) and *Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732) by his cousin and close friend Johann Gottfried Walther, Johann David Heinichen's *Der General-Bass in der Composition* (1728), which was sold by Bach in Leipzig, and Johann Mattheson's *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739).

4 Other terms for *decoratio* are *elocutio* or *elaboratio*; *executio* is also called *pronuntiatio*.

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'bad' notes, comparable to stressed and unstressed syllables. Depending on its position in the bar, a note can be 'good', and thus stressed, or 'bad', unstressed. Applied to the simple metres, this 'hierarchy' of notes results in the coupling of notes into pairs, of which the first one, on the odd-numbered beat or part of the beat, is considered to be 'good', while the 'bad' one falls on the even beat or part of the beat. From the numerous instrumental treatises from this period we learn that technical aspects of bowing, tonguing and fingering were based on this concept.[5] I limit myself to quoting from two very important treatises from the time and environment of Bach. Georg Muffat writes in the Preface to his *Florilegium secundum* (1698):

> Of all the notes found in any composition to be played, there are those that are good . . . , and others that are bad. . . . Good notes are those that seem naturally to give the ear a little repose. Such notes are longer, those that come on the beat or essential subdivisions of measures, those that have a dot after them, and (among equal small notes) those that are odd-numbered and are ordinarily played down-bow. The bad notes are all the others, which like passing notes, do not satisfy the ear so well, and leave after them a desire to go on.[6]

Johann Gottfried Walther gives important supplementary information concerning the possible harmonic functions of a 'good' or 'bad' note in his *Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732):

> *Tempo di buona* is the good part of the beat. Under the equal tactus, the first of two minims, or the first half of the beat is good; also the first and third of four crotchets, the first, third, fifth and seventh of eight quavers, and so forth, because these tempi, or odd-numbered parts of the beat, are suitable for the placement of a caesura, a cadence, a long syllable, a syncopated dissonance, and above all a consonance (from which comes its name – *di buona*). *Tempo di cattiva*, or *di mala* is the bad part of the beat. In the *Tactu aequali* or beat with two equal strokes, the second of two minims or the second half of the beat is bad; also the second and fourth of four crotchets, the second, fourth, sixth and eighth of eight quavers, because these tempi or even-numbered parts of the beat are all different from the above-mentioned parts, and are their opposites.[7]

The fact that Walther says that a syncopated dissonance or a consonance can occur on a 'good' beat means that there are two main distributions of notes in relation to 'good' and 'bad' beats: (1) syncopated dissonance on a 'good' beat – consonance on the following 'bad' beat, and (2) consonance on a 'good' beat – dissonance (passing note, neighbour note, anticipation) on the following 'bad' beat. For string and wind players, this difference between a 'good' and a 'bad' note is easily realized thanks to their ability to play dynamically. On the harpsichord, however,[8] because of its very limited dynamic range, one has to rely almost entirely upon articulation: a 'bad' note will often be slurred to the previous 'good' note in order to soften its attack.[9] This means that the performer's fingering choice depends on the position of the notes in a bar. Despite the fact that the thumb was fully used in Bach's time, the repeated use of, for example, 3 and 4 for right-hand ascending scale passages and 3 and 2 for descending scale passages, hence suggesting groups of two notes, was still very much used. It is revealing that Bach insisted on exactly these fingerings for the first keyboard exercise, which is called *Applicatio* (BWV994), in the Wilhelm Friedemann Bach

5 The concept of metre is historically well documented for this time. For more information see George Houle, *Meter in Music, 1600–1800: Performance, Perception, and Notation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

6 English translation in Houle, *Meter in Music*, 82.

7 English translation in Houle, *Meter in Music*, 83.

8 Although performances with diverse instrumentation certainly have their merits, Gustav Leonhardt convincingly proved that the Art of Fugue was conceived for the harpsichord; see Leonhardt's *The Art of Fugue: Bach's Last Harpsichord Work. An Argument* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952).

9 For further information see John Butt, *Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 52–58.

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subject Contrapunctus 8

rhythmic reduction

Example 1 Contrapunctus 8, from *The Art of Fugue*, BWV1080, ed. Davitt Moroney (Munich: Henle, 1989) (all subsequent examples except for Example 8 derive from this source) (a) bars 1–5^1 (b) rhythmic reduction. Used by permission

notebook.[10] Even in a treatise as late as the *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach states that, with regard to right-hand ascending scale passages, the fingering 'in which the third finger of the right hand crosses the fourth . . . is perhaps more usual than the others'.[11] Applying this baroque concept of metre, with its implications for articulation, to the first subject of Contrapunctus 8, which has no articulation marks, will give us insight into its plausible performing options.

Contrapunctus 8, the first of two triple fugues in the *Art of Fugue*, does not start with (a derivative of) the familiar subject, but, for the first time in the work, with a new subject. Its structure deviates strongly from that of the main *Art of Fugue* subject. Instead of having a clear downbeat and clear diatonic implications, this new subject is based on rhythmic motion from a weak to a strong beat (a result of the upbeat, the chromaticism and the trill which appear on successive 'bad' minims of the first subject), giving the piece a very propulsive character. Its underlying melodic structure is very simple and consists of diatonically descending minims, except at the cadence (see Example 1). The way Bach embellishes this very simple line perfectly illustrates the difference between 'good' and 'bad' minims, depending on their metric position within the bar: the 'good' minim of bars 2 and 3, consisting of an ascending leap of a fourth, undertakes more than the 'bad' minim, which consists of a descending chromatic figure (bar 2^2) or of only one note with a trill (bar 3^2). One possible articulation for this subject, which comes naturally and underlines this baroque concept of metre, is slurring the crotchets of bars 2–3^1 in pairs. Hence the second and fourth crotchets, the 'bad' crotchets, are lighter in execution than the 'good' first and third ones.[12] The structure of the subject also respects one 'good', the first, and one 'bad' minim, the second, per bar: the rhythmic reduction shows that each 'bad' minim is a tone lower than its preceding 'good' minim.

The concept of 'good' and 'bad' crotchets also applies to the *figura corta* in bar 4^2. This typical baroque figure – in this case an embellishment of a minim a (see the rhythmic reduction in Example 1) – appears in its energetic anapaestic form (two short notes followed by a long one) and is performed in the following way: 'the accent falls on the two [quavers], the [crotchet] being played much more lightly'.[13] One could also interpret it, with the same metrical result, as a rhythmical, written-out mordent. During the *confirmatio* (the rhetorical term for a middle entry of the subject) of bars 21^2–25 Bach develops a stretto with this subject,

10 *Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* (1720), Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University. Facsimile edition: *Johann Sebastian Bach: Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach* (1720), ed. Ralph Kirkpatrick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 9.

11 Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (Berlin, 1753), volume 1. English translation in *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments – Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach*, ed. William J. Mitchell (London: Cassell, 1951), 46–47.

12 This is by no means the only possible historically correct articulation for this subject. One can, for example, also realize the strong–weak pairing of the ascending fourth through playing its first note for, say, 3/4 of its value while the second note will then be held for only 1/3 of its value. I cannot agree, however, with Gustav Leonhardt, who claims that the only correct way to execute bars 2^2–3^1 is by playing a three-note slur b♮–b♭–a (*The Art of Fugue: Bach's Last Harpsichord Work*, 44). Because this type of slur over the barline is highly unusual (as far as I know, Bach never applied it in his harpsichord music) I suppose he would have added it to the score if this was his wish.

13 Butt, *Articulation Marks*, 162.

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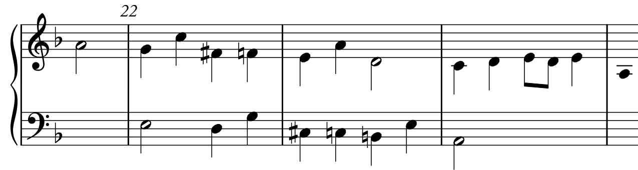
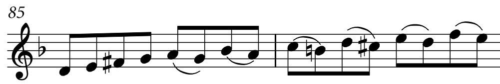
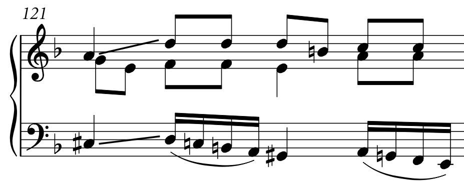


Example 2 Contrapunctus 8, bars 21^2–25^1, alto and bass only



Example 3 Contrapunctus 8, bars 85–86, soprano only



Example 4 Contrapunctus 8, bar 121

confronting the performer with an interesting ambiguity in the realm of metre.[14] Instead of beginning the *comes* on the equivalent metrical point, bar 22^2, it enters at only half a bar's distance from the *dux*, in bar 22^1 (Example 2).[15] This means that the positions of the 'good' and the 'bad' minims of the *comes* are shifted. It should be mentioned, however, that not every scholar sees this section as a stretto. Tovey does not find the term appropriate here, because 'stretto is not the business of this fugue'.[16] But for me this passage illustrates perfectly the peculiarities of stretto: close thematic entries with the focus on the beginning of each entry. The fact that the *comes* breaks off before the *dux*, which happens rather infrequently, does not mean we cannot speak of stretto in this case.

A rare instance where Bach specifies the articulation can be observed in bars 85–86 (Example 3). There he indicates that the quavers in the soprano should be slurred in pairs, creating examples of the *Seufzer*, a musical figure that represents sighing. With these slurs there is no doubt of how this passage should be articulated. Without them, the three groups of four quavers could have been interpreted as *cambiati*,[17] slurred in groups of four.[18] Two bars later this motive is inverted in the bass and should be articulated in the same way.

Applying the concept of 'good' and 'bad' notes also seems to result in a certain relaxation of some traditional voice-leading rules. From what appears from the *Art of Fugue*, fifths and octaves approached by similar motion between soprano and bass are for Bach, even with a leap in the soprano, perfectly acceptable under certain circumstances. Those direct fifths only occur in descending motion from a 'bad' to a 'good' beat (Contrapunctus 11, bars 62–63, Contrapunctus 14, bars 66–67), while direct octaves are only used to

14 I use the term *confirmatio* within fugal, rhetorical analysis for every middle entry, stretto included. Certain theorists limit the conception of *confirmatio* to stretto.

15 This is a so-called stretto *per arsin et thesin* in which notes that fall on the 'good' minims in the *dux* fall on the 'bad' minims in the *comes*, and vice versa.

16 Donald Francis Tovey, *A Companion to 'The Art of Fugue' by J. S. Bach*, third edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 18.

17 When applied to baroque music the *cambiata* is a figure in which two harmonic notes are separated from each other by two consecutive changing notes.

18 There is a similar passage in bars 122–123 in the alto.

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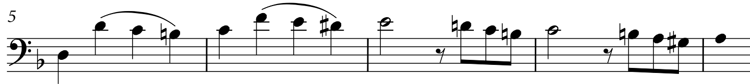
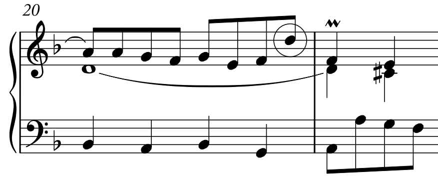


Example 5 Contrapunctus 8, bars 5–9[1], alto only



Example 6 Contrapunctus 8, bars 20–21[1]

ascend from a 'good' to a 'bad' beat (Contrapunctus 8, bar 121; see Example 4). In both cases the harsh effect of the 'mistake' is softened by the circumstances. In the case of the direct fifth, attention principally falls on the inner-voice suspension at the moment of rule-breaking, while the direct octave defends itself because it occurs on a 'bad', light beat after a 'good' beat that includes dissonance. But it remains a strange feeling for a trained harpsichordist to play such a direct fifth or octave, even when it results from a consistent use of the thematic material.

What makes this Contrapunctus so special, from a compositional point of view, is the way in which the *decoratio* helps to clarify the different levels of the *dispositio*. Instead of limiting the concept of 'good' and 'bad' notes to articulation (*decoratio* and *executio*), Bach also applies it to generate structure. The first example can be seen in the transition to the *comes* (bars 5–6), and in all analogous passages, where Bach twice adds a slur (Example 5). These slurs are 'not regular', and probably would not be the performer's first choice, but are given in order to make this transition distinct from its surrounding subjects, which, as suggested earlier, are to be articulated in a regular manner. The figure which emerges, thanks to Bach's slur, strongly resembles a *suspirans* (a rhetorical figure which is characterized by its upbeat quality starting on the second of four quarter divisions of the beat). Contrary, however, to what John Butt writes,[19] this cannot really be called a *suspirans*, because it is not a figure which divides one beat, but takes one and a half beats, starting on a 'bad', second crotchet in bars 5 and 6 and slurring over a 'good' one, the third, up to and including the fourth crotchet.[20] Because this figure would be articulated differently without the slur, Bach has to write it to obtain the execution (and hence the *dispositio*) he wants.[21] On the other hand, the regular *suspirans* of bars 7–8 – which is a diminution of the initial 'special' motive of bars 5 and 6, consisting of three quavers instead of three crotchets – belongs to the standard figures, and hence does not need an indication of articulation from the composer.

The *decoratio* is also conceived in order to distinguish a *confutatio* (the rhetorical term for 'episode') from a *confirmatio*. One possible way of realizing this is by drawing attention to the end of the episode through a *paronomasia* (the rhetorical term for the repetition of a musical idea with alteration for emphasis). The *confutatio* starting in bar 15 makes extensive use of a motive that occurs for the first time in the alto in that same bar (a *suspirans* followed by two descending thirds). In bar 20 (see Example 6) Bach alters the last occurrence of this motive before the *confirmatio* (which starts in bar 21[2]) by writing the last quaver an octave higher than expected.[22] Apart from the fact that he probably wanted to avoid doubling the d[1] in the alto, this

19 Butt, 'Articulation Marks in Primary Sources of J. S. Bach', 193.

20 This motive will be extensively used in the first (in the alto: bar 17 *rectus*, bars 18, 31 and 32 *inversus*) and third sections (as a part of a variant of the main *Art of Fugue* subject) of the piece.

21 We can presume that in the alto of bars 129–131 a slur should be added over the last three crotchets of each bar.

22 There is one more citation of this motive in the bass in bar 21, but it acts as a counterpoint to the subject.

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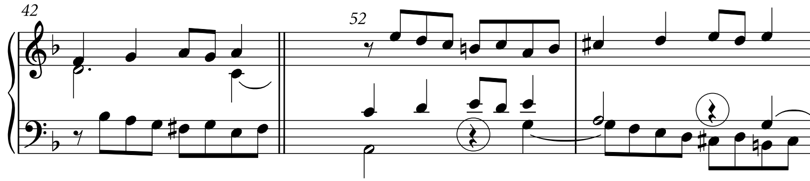
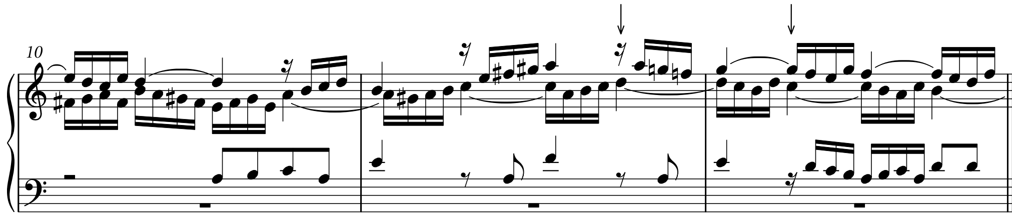
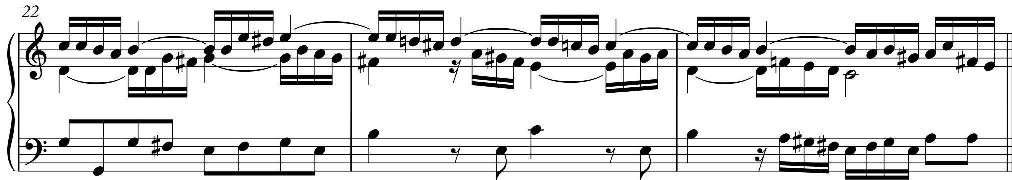


Example 7 Contrapunctus 8 (a) bar 42 (b) bars 52–53





Example 8 Fugue, from *Fantasia and Fugue in A minor*, BWV904, ed. Georg von Dadelsen and Klaus Rönnau (Munich: Henle, 1973) (a) bars 10–12 (b) bars 22–24. Used by permission

adaptation works as a *hyperbole* (the rhetorical term for an unexpected high note in the musical context), and neatly announces the half-cadence at the end of the *confutatio*.

Beneath the combination of the first and second subjects, the bass, which has been silent for two and half bars, re-enters in bar 42 with a motive (which will be used for the construction of extensive episodes) similar to the one from bar 15 on, in which the descending thirds are replaced by a *cambiata* (see Example 7a). Now compare the contrapuntal texture of bar 42 (or 46 or 64) with bar 52 (or 53), in which the preceding dotted minim has been replaced by a minim and a crotchet rest (Example 7b). While bars 42–43^1 only form a little transition to the *comes*, in which the new motive in the bass is purely ornamental, bar 52 is the start of the first *confutatio* of the second section of this fugue. To clarify the *dispositio*, the bass gives this new motive much more importance by accentuating the introductory suspension via the preceding rest, which is systematically imitated by the other voices.[23] Comparing this way of thinking with that in Bach's earlier works shows that the difference in the earlier works between a tie and a rest is on the level of the *decoratio*, not of the *dispositio*. The Fugue in A minor BWV904/2 illustrates this well: in Example 8a a clear distinction is made in the soprano between bar 11^2 (crotchet a^2 followed by a semiquaver rest) and the sequence in the next bar (tied g^2). This shows that Bach only writes the tied note followed by a repetition of the same note when the tied note is dissonant and resolves downwards by step (as occurs systematically in the soprano in bars 23–24 (Example 8b); in bar 11, however, this tied a^2 would have been consonant).

In bars 63 and 109 (Examples 9a and 9b) a notational peculiarity concerning a 'bad' note twice proves to be a very subtle way of distinguishing *confutatio* from *confirmatio*. Instead of writing the expressive

23 To make the passage playable with two hands, Bach has to make an octave displacement (for more information see Malcolm Boyd, *Bach's Instrumental Counterpoint* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1977), 16); the logical continuation of the line in bar 52 would have been a G.

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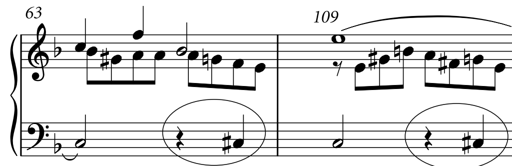
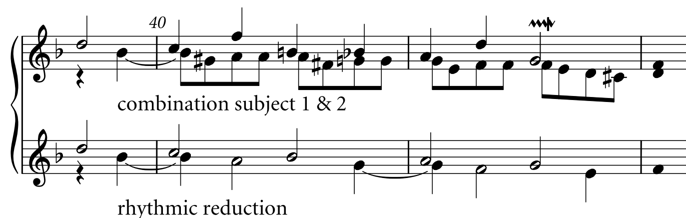


Example 9 Contrapunctus 8 (a) bar 63 (b) bar 109



Example 10 Contrapunctus 8 (a) bars 39^2–42^1, combination of subjects 1 and 2 (b) rhythmic reduction

chromaticism (dotted-minim c♮ followed by crotchet c♯), Bach separates both notes by a crotchet rest in order to articulate the beginning of the *confutatio*, even when this causes an open fifth in bar 109^2. The c♯ that follows the crotchet rest, even if it is a 'bad' note that should be executed lightly, gives this new section a clearer, more energetic start than if it had been slurred to a dotted-minim c♮.

The overall structure is also clarified thanks to Bach's very subtle *decoratio*. Though it was common late-baroque practice to precede the *suspirans* by a suspension, Bach opts on several occasions in this Contrapunctus for a quaver rest. The first time this occurs is in bars 7–8, in the countersubject to the *comes* (see Example 5),[24] while the expected suspension appears only at the beginning of the first episode (bar 15), through which this *confutatio* clearly distinguishes itself from the exposition. Bach's choice not to write these obvious suspensions during the exposition becomes evident from the start of the second section of this fugue (bars 40–41; Example 10), where the second subject is presented, rather unusually, as countersubject to the first. Whereas dissonances were previously avoided in the initial treatment, they are now omnipresent. The rests (as well as the consonances on both first beats) have been replaced by the typical dissonance, not as a real suspension (the note is not tied), it is true, but as an appoggiatura (repeated note), which characterizes the second theme (the only exception being the first dissonance). During performance, the rests of bars 7–8 should be clearly articulated by avoiding the minim 'hanging over' to form an unwanted suspension, in order to make this structural distinction apparent.[25]

The conclusion of the first section of this Contrapunctus offers another example of how the use of rests helps to clarify the overall structure. In the alto in bar 38 Bach writes one crotchet a, then two crotchet rests followed by a crotchet g (Example 11) instead of the obvious line consisting of four crotchets a–b♭–a–g. Apart from the fact that parallel fifths between soprano and alto are thus avoided, the cadence concluding this first section becomes stronger and more 'vertical', thanks to the alto re-entering on the fourth crotchet and having a purely harmonic function.

One does not expect virtuoso, non-contrapuntal passages in a work like the *Art of Fugue*, the contrapuntal demonstration *par excellence*. In Contrapunctus 8, however, there are three such passages which,

24 Another example can be seen in the bass of bars 94–95 and 97, though this is a slightly different situation because the tied note would have been consonant.

25 Another example of this avoided dissonance can be seen in the transition from bar 111 to 112, where the obvious suspension in the soprano has also been replaced by a rest, hence creating a genuine *suspirans*. This decision clearly favours the entry of a new motive in the alto in bar 112 (two crotchets slurred to four quavers), which is imitated half a bar later in the soprano.

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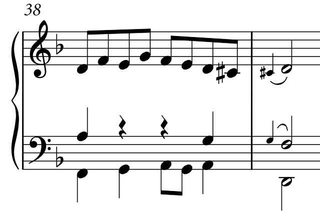
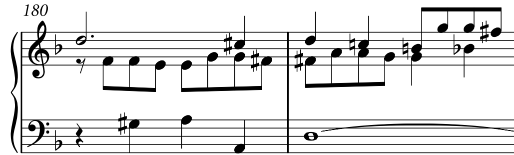
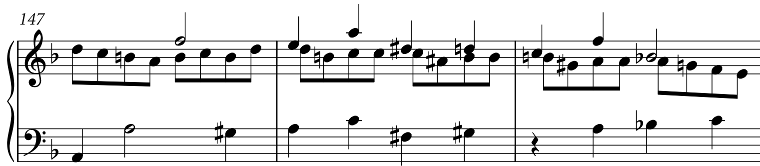


Example 11 Contrapunctus 8, bars 38–39[1]



Example 12 Contrapunctus 8, bars 180–181



Example 13 Contrapunctus 8, bars 147–149

apart from showing Bach as the great keyboard virtuoso, demonstrate that they generate structure by contrasting strongly with the general contrapuntal texture. Hence they form musical and rhetorical climaxes at important structural points (bars 90–92, 119–123 and 178–179). The first one closes the section with the first two subjects, before the inverted *Art of Fugue* subject is introduced. The second passage, closing with two bars of outrageous parallel chords (bars 122–123) and thus creating a powerful climax, precedes a new section in which the *Art of Fugue* theme does not appear. The last virtuoso passage leads to the final cadence of bars 180–181, which is very interesting from a structural point of view. Instead of constructing this material to fit into the perfect authentic cadence (with the result that the piece should have finished there), the middle voice does not take this harmonic phenomenon into account, and stubbornly goes on with its own motive, derived from the *inversus* of the second theme (Example 12). The cadence, consequently weakened, gives way to the short coda, where the combination of the three subjects occurs for the last time.

This combination of the three subjects occurs for the first time in bars 147[2]–152[1]. Bach makes this highly important structural moment even more special thanks to an unexpected harmonization and the subtle alteration of accidentals in the three subjects (Example 13). The harmonization is not started in the obvious key of F major, as the melodic structure of the subjects suggests, but in A minor. The next triple combination, which starts in E minor, immediately following the first without transition and displays an even bolder harmonization: the a♯[1] in the alto (functioning as the leading note of V/V in E minor) is used enharmonically as b♭ (the seventh of a secondary diminished-seventh chord leading to ii6 in C major), in order to make the modulation from E minor to the initially avoided C major (bar 153; see Example 14). So instead of contenting himself with simply giving the combination of all the subjects, Bach deliberately alters the evident harmony of the first two triple combinations in order to render this structural high point even more important.

Right at the end of the piece there seems to be a fourth, virtuoso passage, in bars 186–187, which, however, merely decorates the final cadence. But it is exactly this 'decoration' which is so telling. Consider the six-four

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Example 14 Contrapunctus 8, bars 152^2–154

Example 15 Contrapunctus 8 (a) bar 187 (b) rhythmic reduction

chord and its resolution in the penultimate bar (Example 15). Although the rhythmic reduction shows a straightforward application of the concept of 'good' and 'bad' notes, Bach's *decoratio* of the six-four chord could appear to be somewhat misleading. Instead of a realization clearly defining this six-four chord during the first half of that bar, Bach writes a simultaneous E in soprano and alto on the 'bad', second crotchet, hence creating an ambiguous harmonic situation, through which the six-four seems to resolve too soon on the second crotchet. Both Es, however, are non-harmonic notes: the e^1 in the soprano is an incomplete neighbour note, not an incorrect resolution of the fourth, and the e in the alto is a passing note. One could imagine harmonically clearer versions for the semiquavers in the soprano – d^1–$c\sharp^1$–d^1–e^1–f^1–g^1–a^1–f^1 (or d^1) or d^1–a–b–$c\sharp^1$–d^1–e^1–f^1–d^1 (or e^1) – but they would lack the structural impact of Bach's version, which draws the attention very much to this final cadence and hence gives it a more definitive character than my proposed 'more regular' versions would have done.

The *Art of Fugue*, which is hardly the abstract work it has often been claimed to be, demands that performers engage with its idiosyncratic counterpoint not as a matter of theory but as a mode of communication – of performance. Contrapunctus 8 is, in this respect, one of the clearest examples in the *Art of Fugue* because of its strong interaction between *dispositio* and *executio*, and it shows that Bach was both a stunning master of counterpoint, who perfectly understood the rhetorical art, and a highly practical composer, as well as being a keyboard virtuoso.

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