Baroque Performance Practice

Fugal Improvisation in the Baroque Era—Revisited

On material from German sources

By Maxim Serebrennikov

But the basis for all improvisation must be preparation. If I haven’t prepared, I can’t improvise. If I’ve made careful preparations I can always improvise.

—Johann Mattheson, 1739

The question of fugal improvisation in the Baroque era has been raised in the pages of musicology literature more than once. Despite reviews today and in the practice of Baroque improvisation, the improvisation of fugue has rarely become an object of independent study. Besides William Benwicks’s book, The Language Manuscript: Fugal Improvisation through Figured Bass (2001), it is difficult to name any widely known work that is specifically dedicated to the art of fugal improvisation in the Baroque era. Much valuable and interesting information about this performance practice of baroque musicians is scattered throughout various books and articles, whereas a monograph that is not even directly related to improvisation.

The present article therefore aims:
1) to summarize the existing research on partimento practice;
2) to describe all the stages of fugal improvisation, beginning with the mastery of separate elements and finishing with an organization of the whole, as recorded in German sources of the first half of the 18th century.

Introduction

Today the ability of an academically trained musician to create “on-the-fly” is thought of as exceptional—for the gifted only. Yet it is well known that in the Baroque era every professional musician was expected to possess this “gift.” Within the rich diversity of improvisational genres and forms that made up the standard set for which a Baroque improviser had to be prepared, fugue held the greatest honor of place.

At that time it was not just the great musicians who were skilled at improvisation, every church organist had to be able to improvise a fugue on a given theme. The ability to improvise fugue was considered a requirement for every serious musician to such a degree that the lack of that skill could serve as a reason for ridicule. And although the testing of organists did not always include fugue improvisation, both Mattheson and Adlung think that no one should be taken as an organist who has not proved his right to such a post through the improvisation of fugue.1

In the 18th century if you couldn’t improvise you couldn’t call yourself a keyboard player. Worse than that, you couldn’t get a job, since all organists required was the ability to improvise a fugue on a given subject.2

Truly, the ability to improvise fugue was a necessary skill for organists, because a fugal statement of musical material was stipulated by the very program of the liturgical service. Beginning in the second half of the 17th century, the role of the organist, on whose shoulders rested the burden of the musical life of the church, grew to such an extent that the organ, at one time humbly accompanied church ritual, became a most important attribute of the church service, with the organist as the main participant. This was especially true in the northern regions of Germany, where the organ gained such acoustic strength and richness of register that it became like “a second minister,” and the musical compositions that it “delivered” were self-contained “texts” addressed to the congregants. Mattheson emphasized that fugal presentation of the chorale subject on the organ helped “to arouse reverence within the listeners.”

For musicians in the secular sphere, fugal improvisation as a skill was not as necessary as it was for church organists, but the ability, nevertheless, was always appreciated. In the circle of experts and enlightened amateurs, fugal improvisation on a subject prepared by someone among those present could become one of the most intriguing and entertaining elements of a musical program. Success in such improvisation provided the performer with the established reputation of master of the highest order (a reputation that could help in a further promotion).

Although fugal improvisation was a widespread practice among Baroque musicians, we are forced to gather information on its technique literally in bits and pieces. As early as 1702, Andreas Werckmeister, in his treatise Harmonologia musicus, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent, points out the reason: “many musicians are secretive and reticent. Possibly, musicians divulged their knowledge about improvisation extremely unwillingly because they considered it a unique commodity, providing a constant supply of students. Perhaps they did not wish to destroy the myth of the divine origin of the gift of improvisation. In any case, even in treatises that are dedicated specifically to improvisation and fantasiaura, there are no concrete instructions that would allow us today to understand how fugue was improvised.

Naturally, some secrets of Baroque fugal improvisation have already been revealed by scholars. David Ledbetter writes about one of them:

By the early eighteenth century, instruction in fugue in Bach’s tradition gave out of the figured bass, rather than contrapuntal treatises, as it was approached in the contrapuntal genre. The technique of this was practiced by using fugato movements expressed as figured bass, called in Italian partimento fugue.3

To the uninitiated musician such a statement may seem paradoxical, since according to our notion fugue and figured bass represent distinct types of musical thinking and observe a different tradition of notation. However, the discovery during the last decade of a large number of examples of so-called partimento fugue or thoroughbass fugue shows that improvisation of fugue during the Baroque epoch—just like the improvisation of homophonic forms—actually had its foundation in the practice of figured bass.4 The detailed study and comparison of these examples, strengthened by the testimony of contemporary treatises, allows us to take another step forward on the path to understanding the Baroque technique of fugue extempore.

That the overwhelming majority of improvised fugues during the Baroque epoch were thoroughbass fugues can be explained from the point of view of psychology. The texture of a “contra-puntal fugue” (i.e., polytonic texture) is formed by combining individualized melodic lines, each vying for our attention. In contrast, the texture of thoroughbass fugue is predominantly two-dimensional—that is, it can be clearly divided into the leading voice and a complex of accompanying voices. Consequently, improvisation of a multi-part “contra-puntal fugue” necessitates the division of attention into three or more channels, whereas performance of a multi-part thoroughbass fugue demands division into just two. Experience shows that the attention of even a well-prepared musician is capable of maintaining control over only two (a maximum of three) simultaneously proceeding streams of information.5 As such, for objective (psycho-physiological) reasons, improvisation of thoroughbass fugue is attainable for a broad mass of musicians, whereas improvisation of a multi-part “contra-puntal fugue” is negotiable to a rare few.6

Having touched on the issue of the limits of human attention, which is so relevant to musical improvisation, it would be wise to ignore the opportunity to quote Sergey Prokofiev, in an interview published by the New York Times in 1930:

Three melodies remain about the limit that the average ear can grasp and follow at one time. This can be done when the melodies are clearly sounded and contrasted in pitch and tone color. For a short time the ear may perceive and assimilate the effect of four different parts, but this will not be long continued, if the four parts, or melodies, are of equal importance. Listening to a four or five even or six-part fugue, the ear is conscious, possibly, of the presence of all the voices, but it only perceives and follows precisely the most important of the melodies being sounded. The other parts fill in to enrich the musical background and harmony, but they become as blurred lines of the picture. They are not clearly recorded in the listener’s consciousness as separate melodic strands in the tonal fabric. This being true, it behooves the composer to realize that in the polytonic as well as in the structural sense he must keep within certain bounds.7

Such is the point of view of a professional musician who possessed extraordinary musical faculties. As for specialists in the fields of psychology and physiology, they have yet to come to a single opinion concerning the volume and capabilities of human attention.

Analysis

The modern theory of improvisation is based on these principles: 1) “Improvisation is based on memory” and “the improviser does not create the material, but builds it from prepared blocks, from long-memorized musical segments”;8,9 and 2) the improviser always works from a given model.10 What were the building blocks that Baroque performers utilized in the process of fugue improvisation? In what sequence could they combine them? To answer these questions, let us turn to concrete musical material.


Example 2. Fugue answer + countersubject, and fourth statement (Kirchhoff, L.A.B.C. Musical, Prelude and Fugue in B-Flat Major)
The overwhelming majority of German samples of thoroughbass fugue follow the strophic form in their composition. In addition, organization of the musical material inside the strophes is very often based on the typical Baroque-era structure of “head and tail.” where the role of the “head” is played by a group of statements (more rarely by a single statement) of the subject and the role of the “tail” by sequences based on standard harmonic formulae of thoroughbass. The conclusion of each strophe is marked by a cadence. Such is the method used by Kirchhoff, for example, in his C-major fugue from L.A.B.C. Musical (c. 1734), which clearly presents three strophes (Example 1).

Strophe 1 includes five statements of the subject (bars 1–9), a 2–6 sequence (bars 9–11), and a 7–6 cadence (bar 12).

Strophe 2 includes two statements of the subject in the upper part in immediate succession (bars 12–15), a statement in the bass (bars 16–17) and the 2–6 sequence already used in strophe 1 (bars 18–20), and a 7–6 cadence (bars 20–21).

Strophe 3 contains a statement of the subject in the bass (bars 22–24), a 2–6 sequence that shifts to 7–7 (bars 22–25), and the more explicit 5–6/4–5/3 cadence (bars 25–26).

The strophic nature of German samples of thoroughbass fugue, the result of work that uses a single model. It was specifically the *strophe* that served as the universal compositional unit, by which through duplication the improviser assembled his fugue. The number of strophes was varied, according to how long the improvisation should last. The structure of the strophe, though, did not vary. In this way the improvisor’s task was to quickly and neatly fill out this preassembled structure with concrete musical material.

Obviously, the improvisation of a fugue had as its starting point the harmonization of the chosen or suggested subject. A harmonic, as a rule, was kept for all multi-part statements of the subject, becoming, night we say, a retained “counter-harmony” (Gegenharmonie).\(^{19}\) Changes to the harmonization were made only in cases where a tonal answer was necessary. Frequently, even the counterpoint to the answer (the first countersubject) was drawn out of this same “counter-harmony.” This is easily affirmed by noting the numeral for the harmonic intervals between the answer and countersubject and then comparing the result to the author’s own figures for analogous multiplications of the type he suggests are required in fugue improvisation. The tendency toward an increase in the hierarchical degree of unit complexity is another specific quality of improvisatory technique. The combination of smaller syntactic units into larger ones helps to expand the general volume of information accessible within short-term memory.\(^{20}\)

The similarity among the strophes of thoroughbass fugue is also increased by the uniformity of the order of entries. In all strophes, a descending order of entries of the parts predominates as a result of the frequent and frequent assignment between the suggested subject and episodes selected from among those prepared during the process of musical training. The ability to competently use these preparations from “homework assignments” was very likely a basic craft known to the improviser.

The degree to which the improviser relied upon such materials prepared in advance can be judged by examining, for example, the B-flat-major fugue from Johann Caspar Simon’s collection *Leichte Präludia und Fugen* (1746). Of its total 37 bars, 26.5 bars (i.e., more than half) are based on material connected neither with the fugue subject, nor with its countersubject. The especially obvious “homework preparations” reveal themselves in the construction of the fugue, which is made up of four autonomous sections resembling, in their function, additions in the tonic key (Example 4). At first, Simon builds a sequence on the harmonic formula 7–7, embellishing the bass line with melodic figuration. He then builds a second sequence on the harmonic formula 2–6 in strict chordal texture. Further, he inserts a toccata-like fragment pulled from the fugue’s preceding Prelude fragment that also in its nature a sequence. Finally, he concludes the piece with a decisive cadence in solid chordal presentation (Grave). Comparing the overall gravity of thematic and non-thematic material in Simon’s fugue, the conclusion suggests itself. Essentially, if the improviser were not restricted by concrete devices of thematic work, then the entire fugue, excepting statements within the exposition, could be designed from elements prepared in advance.

Judging by some samples of thoroughbass fugue, the “stock” material could penetrate straight into the group of statements, replacing separate statements or pulling them out. For example, in Fugue no. 21 (F major) from the Langlo(t)z Manuscript, the second strophe begins not with the restatement of the subject, but with non-thematic counterpoint, and only the bass part enters with the theme (Example 5).

In the D-minor Fantasia from the *Myllan Tabulaturbuch*, a straightforward “homework preparation” in the form of a typical sequence 6/5–3/5 appears in the first strophe between the fourth and fifth statements (Example 6a). Viewed separately, this fragment appears optional—since the other statements work successfully without it (Example 6b). The energy expended by a performer for fugue improvisation could be conserv ed by using the same episode for various strophes. This repetition could be identical, but it could also be modified by means of various textual clichés. For example, the second and third episodes of the anonymous G-major Prelude (which is in fugue form) from the *Myllan Tabulaturbuch* are based on a single harmonic formula, the 7–7 progression, though the shapes of their...
texture are distinct. In the first case, the lower voice is diminished; in the second, the pair of upper voices (in regular imitative counterpoint). Incidentally, this prelude demonstrates direct application of Hartung’s aforementioned recommendations: the prelude’s second episode (Example 7a) differs from his sequence shown in Example 3a only by keys.

The existence of a single stockpile of thoroughbass harmonic formulae inevitably led to the appearance of universal sequences that traverse the pages of thoroughbass literature from one composition to the next, regardless of authorship. Comparison of the episode sections of numerous thoroughbass fugues makes clear that of the great variety of harmonic formulae offered in contemporary thoroughbass literature there is a precious few sequential patterns predominately: 7–7, 6/5–5, 6–6, 4/2–6.

The manner of sequential motion also deserves special comment. In many samples of thoroughbass fugue, the episodes are based on diatonic sequences that descend stepwise down the scale. On one hand, descending motion step-by-step possesses a certain inertia, which under the conditions of improvisation (i.e., mental and psychological tension and temporal deficit) just plays into performer’s hands. On the other hand, diatonic motion step-by-step provides the sequence freedom in the selection of the target tonality. In reality, the great tonal mobility is hidden in diatonic sequence, a trajectory of such a sequence could be easily and organically turned at any moment into one of closely related keys. Here is a small experiment: the test of the key possibilities of a 2–6 sequence from the second strophe of the C-major fugue from Kirchhoff’s L’A.B.C. Musical (Example 8).

As these examples demonstrate, it is possible to conclude the sequence in any closely related key without applying much effort. Understandably, the target key will influence the length of the sequence. Here it is very important not to lose a sense of balance and good measure. Although the versions represented in Examples 8a and 8b are technically no different than the remaining ones, these two are much less suited to actual artistic use due to their extended monotony. Should Kirchhoff have needied, in the process of improvisation, to expand the fugue by adding another strophe, he likely would have followed version c) or d) in place of the cadence on the C-major tonic.24

Once the fugue’s continuation took a concrete shape in the mind of the improviser, he could stop the potentially endless development of a sequence via the most convenient cadential formula. The playing of cadences (as well as sequences) in any key of the instrument—literally, with closed eyes—was also a necessary skill for every professional keyboardist of the Baroque era. In the opinion of many 18th-century musicians, cadential formulae are the basis, the foundation of thoroughbass; it is specifically this skill that forms the starting point for practical study of the trade. The number and types of cadential formulae varies with each source. The Percepts and Principals (1738) attributed to Johann Sebastian Bach, for example, contains twenty patterns among the most frequently used (Example 9).

Immediately following the cadence, occasionally commencing upon its final tones, the new strophe begins and all events of the described process are repeated. The similarity of the strophes imparts to the unfolding of the fugue’s form a character of repeated expositions. The formal approach to realization of the strophic scheme inevitably aroused the feeling of monotony, which, naturally, stirred up criticism from contemporaries. Mattheson, who regularly attended testing of organists, wrote:

One should restrict oneself even less to the practice of some organists, who first quite respectfully, without the slightest embellishment, perform the theme through on the entire keyboard in nothing but sonorities and pastoral thirds; then begin again just as circumstantly with the consequent from its beginning; always proceeding the same tune; interpreting nothing imitative or syncopating, but constantly only playing the naked chord, as if it were a thoroughbass.25

Here are the impressions produced on Marpurg by a certain organist who attempted to play fugue ex tempor: Someone often has the good intention to make it better. But what does he do? He slams out the figured bass, and this is terrible to hear. There are no suspensions which make the harmony pleasant, fluent and coherent. It is a jolting harmony. One hears no strrett, no motive development of the theme. There is no order, and the number of voices one can only surmise at the end, when as, per forma, it ought to be clear directly after the first exposition of the theme through different voices of the fugue. The theme is never be wisely advised in the middle voices. You only ever hear it above or below—as one hand accompanies another as in an aria. One never hears the theme as comfortable, nor at the appropriate time, expressively and sensitively for the mind and the ear in a sustained and affecting way. It is but a senseless din and tumult—not to mention the discord within the harmony.26
The picture described by Mattheson and Marpurg was characteristic of improvisations by mediocre organists. The more talented and gifted performers avoided precise repetition of strophes and brought to each new strophe a certain degree of newness, to which extant samples of thoroughbass fugue eloquently testify. In addition to the aforementioned tonal reinvention of strophes, one can quite often find such methods of refashioning as introducing a new counterpoint to the subject, “register leap” (i.e., a skipping of two or more register pitches where the subject can enter), and the use of stretto in the final strophe.

Although the opinion does exist that “the part of the fugue related to statements of the subject was created during improvisation,” there is reason to suggest that even during these sections the performer could sometimes refer to prepared material. Judging from extant samples of thoroughbass fugue, the study of fugal improvisation included not just the regular practice of sequential progressions and cadences, but the development of a definite set of concrete approaches to working with the most common types of subjects. Describing the demands placed on candidates for the vacancy of organist at the Hamburg cathedral, Mattheson noted:

I don’t consider it art to concern people (organists) with unknown themes; rather, it is better to take something well-known and flowing in order to work it out even better. That is what matters, and the listener will like it better than some chromatic fiddling about.

If one allows for the possibility that Mattheson was not alone in this opinion, then the chances of being tested on a subject built of familiar melodic patterns, or even on a known subject, were not so small, and thus the entire improvisation could come down to a combination of prepared materials.

Let us recall, for example, the subject that King Frederick the Great suggested to J. S. Bach for an improvised fugue in Potsdam (Example 10). It is not known with certainty whether Frederick himself composed this subject or borrowed it, but judging by its melodic profile, the monarch had chosen to demonstrate to Bach his knowledge in the “learned style” (gelehrter Stil). It must be noted that the subject contains four thematic elements, and all of them are conventional within Baroque style: a) movement in the tonic triad, b) a jump of a seventh (saltus duriusculus), c) descending chromatic movement (passus duriusculus), and d) melodic cadence. Any Baroque musician would certainly

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**Example 7. Mylau Tabulaturbuch, No. 123, Prelude in G Major**

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**Example 9. J. S. Bach, Precepts and Principals, the most-used final cadences**

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know these melodic patterns, along with their counterpoints, the principal techniques of fuge and prelude, and can master the harmonization of chorales and the handling of counterpoint. With figures is fixed. In this way, every set encompasses all necessary material for planning any statement of the subject, whether alone or with multiple voices, whether in the tonic or in the dominant.

To thanks to preparations, the process of fuge improvisation is consid- erably simplified, since the need to search for a harmonization of the subject with figures is figured. In this way, every set encompasses all necessary material for planning any statement of the subject, whether alone or with multiple voices, whether in the tonic or in the dominant.

In summary, the improvisation of fugue during the Baroque epoch was not necessarily the spontaneous nor extem- poraneous fruit of inspired fancy. Much more often it was soundly prepared and planned on all levels: from the syntactic to the sequential unfolding, and through the development, whether in the tonic or in the dominant. The outer strophes are in the tonic, while the central ones are in the closely related keys (in dominant and parallel). It is not difficult to imagine how many different figuration preludes could have been created on the basis of only one model, varying merely harmonic content and textural parameter.

As a result, the entire improvisation could be boiled down to finding the right harmonization for the given subject, and the development, whether in the tonic or in the dominant. The outer strophes are in the tonic, while the central ones are in the closely related keys (in dominant and parallel). It is not difficult to imagine how many different figuration preludes could have been created on the basis of only one model, varying merely harmonic content and textural parameter.

There is reliable evidence that the strophic form was purposefully worked out in the process of musical training. For example, Précis et Principes contains a set of fourteen keyboard exercises for mastering the harmonic forms and their counterpoint in the most common fugue genres: some are precisely identical in form—all are strophes (Example 12). The inner strophes are in the tonic, while the central ones are in the closely related keys (in dominant and parallel). It is not difficult to imagine how many different figuration preludes could have been created on the basis of only one model, varying merely harmonic content and textural parameter.

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The term "Gegenharmonie" first appeared in Abhandlung von der Fuge by Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, where it is given the following definition: "Counterharmony. Thus is named the material in the remaining parts which is set against the subject." ("Die Gegenharmonie. So heißt diejenige Komposition, die dem Figensatz in den übrigen Stimmen entgegengesetzt wird.") Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, Abhandlung von der Fuge (Berlin, 1753), S. 18.

Since all standard harmonic structures in thoroughbass are noted in shorthand, we have added to the original figuring (where necessary) those signatures within brackets, which were implied by default.

Example 13. Langlo(t)z Manuscript, Prelude and Fugue No. 45 in C Minor: Prelude