

Fugue: Concepts and Analysis

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Terminology

fugue: “a polyphonic composition with a texture made up of a constant number of melodic lines... based on a theme that begins in one voice, is imitated by another, again by a third, and so on, until each voice until each voice has stated it.”¹

voice: one of the contrapuntal lines in a piece; in a fugue, usually designated *soprano*, *alto*, *tenor* or *bass* based on its relative position in the first exposition

subject: the theme of the fugue; presented first in a single voice; the structure of the subject will define the tonic key and much of the contrapuntal character of the fugue

head motive: the first part of the subject that a composer may use independently without using the entire subject.

answer: a version of the subject designed to imitate while also either confirming or moving forward the tonality established by the subject; typically the second entry; may be in either tonic or dominant key

real answer: an answer that is an exact transposition of the subject

tonal answer: an answer that maintains the contour of the subject while altering some intervals to maintain the desired tonality

countersubject: a contrapuntal accompaniment to the subject that appears consistently or nearly consistently throughout the fugue

exposition: a section of a fugue in which all voices enter with subject or answer; always found at the beginning, may recur later

episode: a section of a fugue with no use of the subject or answer

stretto: a section in which the subject appears in overlapping imitation (canon) with itself (the subject must be designed for this purpose from the outset)

inversion: reversing the melodic intervals of a subject (in either real or tonal fashion); may produce single entries or an entire exposition

diminution: making the rhythmic values of a passage (e.g., the subject) shorter by a consistent fraction

augmentation: making the rhythmic values of a passage longer by a consistent fraction; more common than diminution

pedal point: held out notes, usually in the bass, that often signal the end of a fugue

retrograde: playing a passage backwards; rare in fugue because of the difficulty of recognizing the technique

¹ Green, Douglass M. *Form in Tonal Music: An Introduction to Analysis*. 2nd ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979, p. 258.

invertible counterpoint: counterpoint designed so that the vertical position of the voices can be changed; frequently employed in fugue

fugue in contrary motion: a fugue in which the answer is the inversion of the subject

double fugue: a fugue with two equally important subjects, with two common approaches

1) both subjects may be presented initially and simultaneously

2) the second subject appears later in the fugue, often in counterpoint with the first subject

triple fugue: a fugue with three equally important subjects, on similar lines to the double fugue

Analysis of a fugue: questions to ask

- How many **voices** are there, and what are their ranges?
- What is the character of the **subject**?
 - Is it harmonically open or closed?
 - What specific rhythmic and melodic features does the subject have that the composer may exploit later in the fugue?
- How is the **answer** different from the subject? What specific modifications did the composer make to the subject to create the answer?
- What materials accompany the subject? Are they consistent enough to be considered a **countersubject**? Is this a **double fugue**?
- What is the order of voices in the **first exposition**? Do they use the subject or the answer when they enter?
- Is there **linking material** between the entries in the exposition? If so, what is its character? Is it derived from the subject in some way?
- Find **all entries of the subject/answer**.
 - What voices are they in?
 - What keys are they in?
 - Are they grouped into **additional expositions**, or are they **individual entries**?
- **Compare the expositions** to each other.
- **Identify cadences** by their key.
 - How does the composer get from key to key?
 - What is the overall harmonic plan of the fugue?
- **Identify episodes**. Look for use of sequence and **invertible counterpoint**, and examine their **motivic structure**. Compare the episodes within a fugue for similarities to each other.
- **Compare expositions to episodes**: what percentage of time is spent on each?
 - Are there ideas from the subject that are exploited in the episodes?
- Seek out the transformational techniques, especially **inversion**, **stretto**, and **augmentation**.
- Is the fugue any of the **special types** (contrary motion, double, triple, etc.)
- What is the **form** of the fugue (remembering that fugue is a practice and a process, not a form)?
- Is this a fugue embedded within a **larger work**? What dramatic or functional **purpose** does it serve? **Why** did the composer choose to write a fugue?
- How is this fugue similar or different to **other fugues** the composer may have known?