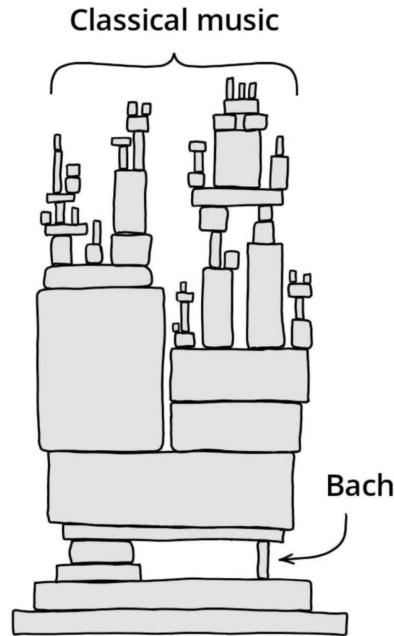


Bach's Art of Fugue Program Note



Behold, the meme.

Unattributed, whimsical, banal yet deft, it teases us about Bach's great mystery: how could one person accomplish so much?

Bach is like Shakespeare in that he invites deciphering. We know that he is one person and so are each of us, yet everything else in comparison feels as baffling as the pyramids. How *on earth* did he compose, rehearse and perform three whole cantata cycles during those first three years in Leipzig, for example - summoning a completely orchestrated church service for each Sunday of the year? Did he sleep?

However we may try to understand him, like Shakespeare, Bach is a Rorschach: the more we look at him the more we see ourselves. To conclude Shakespeare didn't write his own plays is to reveal much about you and little about him. To think faith wasn't enough motivation for Bach - in God, himself, in music, and in us - is to doubt the power of faith inside you.

I've spent the last 15 years writing, mounting, and touring works I call concert theatre - a 50/50 marriage of classical music and story. I believe this egalitarian framework evens out the class system you often find in the theatre (actors more important than musicians), and in opera (the score is more important than the story). For just a moment, concert theatre puts us all on the same stage, in the same light, to grapple together with music's awesome meaning. How do

sounds make us feel such profound things? What is music doing on our planet? Why does every known human culture make it?

I recognized in this commission from AAM that in my original work I had been avoiding the German gorilla in the room. After writing some 30 pieces, chiefly for full orchestra and actors but increasingly for early music outfits, I had yet to fully confront the great master with my questions, my awe, and my limitations. What I truly thought about Bach, I was forced to admit, was a mystery to me. I'm a fan, of course - to not be would be apostasy. Bach is the greatest musical genius the world will ever know. There comes a time when we must take in his astonishing form and humbly submit to a truly vexing mystery. How was it possible? How *on earth?*

To make matters even more daunting, *The Art of Fugue* is his final work: the pinnacle of the pinnacle. Theorists over the last 275 years have so dissected its themes and iterations that to illuminate the work itself onstage seemed both a pedantic and an unoriginal path. Or to say it differently, mystery is much more fun. So, dear reader, you may consider this work to not be about Bach at all - but about you.

--

I set out over a year ago to tackle two great works that had long been languishing on my shelf. John Eliot Gardiner's *Bach, Music in the Castle of Heaven* may change your life. Gardiner lovingly gazes at the many tributaries that formed this rushing river of industry we know as J.S. Bach. Everything from the Thirty Years War to the German discovery of potatoes feels convincingly relevant, and then you have his many fine recordings to go along with it. My writing lives in the debt of his life's work.

Douglas Hofstadter's similarly-sized 1979 tome, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, was another mountain I'd long wished to climb. I must attribute it as another huge influence here, whilst not being quite as rabid about recommending it to you. The book is structured antiphonally, with a chapter about the philosophy of reiterative logic and thought ('fugu-ing') followed by a whimsical scene of fictional characters plucked from the mind of Lewis Carroll. Hofstadter's creativity reinforced an admittedly odd instinct for humor in my piece. If you decide to embark on his masterpiece, just know that snacking on it two chapters at a time may be a better approach.

Donald Francis Tovey's essential companion to *Bach's Art of Fugue* held my hand as I made a cumbersome musicological journey through each bar myself. I opted for the open score in the ancient clefs per his instruction, and followed each theme as it reincarnated into increasingly impenetrable masses of aural logic. My friends, this is a worthy journey, but not for the faint of heart. It plainly revealed my limits as a musician. Those boundaries required a new appreciation of musical perception. I do not mince words when I say that this horizon can be a spiritual experience. That experience showed me the dramatic zenith of this adaptation.

My first career as an actor helped me invent relationships onstage out of whole cloth. After all, there are no characters in Bach's work - there aren't even any instruments specified. The piece is such a practical *tabula rasa* that it somehow inspired a desire, to borrow a bit of

theatre jargon, to play against type. *The Art of Fugue* is seriously heady, difficult stuff. What if it's all about play? Well, of course it is.

Inescapable in a proper study of acting is status. In any group of people onstage, some are simply deemed more important by the world they inhabit. One might be a king or a millionaire, perhaps abnormally witty or attractive - so much is obvious. But the status game becomes much more engrossing in the middle of the pack. Which courtier has the prince's ear today? Who fancies herself better than her best friend? Is it a secret?

You will realize for yourself that in my play, the status of people is rather like the status of musical subjects in a fugue. It is a metaphor I try to slowly unfurl, and the pleasure of this unfolding is essentially what the play is.

In the world of comedy, where everything is exaggerated, status can become as consequential as life and death. Observe that the six Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - six 'hard-handed men of Athens' - are locked in a meaningless pecking order among the lowest class of society, with Peter Quince and Bottom vying for the *grand fromage*. Hilarity ensues.

Clown work is often rewarding because it can boil dynamics down to their essence: what do you need, and how much do you need it? Everyone has a strength, however odd it may be, but more wonderfully, everyone has a weakness, which invariably invites failure. Amusingly for our species, failing is funny. Thus, every group of clowns from the Marx Brothers to the cast of *30 Rock* is invisibly distributed by their social importance. Smart clowns are hilarious because nincompoops who fancy themselves geniuses eventually fall back to earth. Lowest status clowns are funny because somehow, idiocy is adorable and so is stepping on a rake. Middle status clowns are funny because they're generally, erm, not entirely sure... precisely where they, are? Once you see relationships this way, you begin to see the pattern everywhere. Among the children of actor Brian Cox in the TV show *Succession*. In *The Three Amigos*. In the houses of Parliament.

What I love about this work is often the person who is punched the hardest stumbles on a noble truth. The lowest-class *zanni* in the commedia dell'arte tradition merely wants to sleep, eat, and have sex, and is there no wisdom in that? An empty brain finds presence the fastest. Don't we pathologically let our intellects get in the way?

I also believe that anyone - classical music fan or no - can face the great mystery of Bach for himself, and in a single moment, teach us all a valuable lesson. Concert life is full of conventions that inadvertently exclude people who don't feel included. Sunlight isn't the best disinfectant - fun is - and it can relax us so we aren't encouraged to try so darn hard to be smarter.

Music isn't made for culture, for status, for fame, and it certainly isn't made for money. Music is made for you. It happens in your brain, playing on the pinball machine of your own lived experiences, and inspiring your unique curiosity. Without you, there is no music. Without your ears, Bach is an historical Thuringian organist who fathered an astonishing amount of children. You are the missing piece of the great puzzle of Bach. Or to quote Igor Stravinski: "There is no beauty in music itself, the beauty is within the listener."