

FRIEDRICH WILHELM MARPURG'S *ABHANDLUNG VON DER FUGE* AND THE EARLY RECEPTION OF THE FUGUES OF JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Introduction

The concepts of 'universal' and 'natural' played an important role in change of understanding of Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) music in the second half of the eighteenth century. One of the phases in which these crucial concepts can be observed is in the discussions regarding counterpoint (precisely, fugue). Therefore, this paper focuses on two writings of Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (1718–1795): the introduction of the second edition of J. S. Bach's *Art of Fugue*¹ and *Abhandlung von der Fuge*.² These descriptions will show one of the new understandings of fugues in Germany in the middle of the eighteenth century, which was brought about by the new implication of the term 'natural'. Also, examining Marpurg's writings on fugues in the 1750s from an aesthetical viewpoint will clarify that the understanding of this genre changed during that time, and the understanding of both fugue and Bach's music progressed in a parallel manner. It provides a new perspective when considering the early stages of J. S. Bach's reception.

I. The Theoretical Conditions Regarding the Concept of 'Natural'

It is helpful to explain the concept of 'natural' before the time of Marpurg's writings. As Matthew Dirst indicated, in Bach criticism in the eighteenth century, there was 'the gradual shift from lively debate during the first half of the century over his music's fulsome textures and his fondness for complexity to general agreement by 1800 that these were in fact among the most meritorious aspects of his art'.³ This shift can be most clearly observed based on the concept of 'natural': 'Though derided

BDok II: Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (eds.), *Fremdschriftliche und gedruckte Dokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs 1685–1750*. Bach-Dokumente, II (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik; Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1969).

BDok III: Hans-Joachim Schulze (ed.), *Dokumente zum Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs 1750–1800*. Bach-Dokumente, III (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik; Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1972).

NBR: Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (eds.), Christoph Wolff (rev. and enl.), *The New Bach Reader. A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

¹ Johann Sebastian Bach, *Die | Kunst der Fuge | durch | HERRN | Johann Sebastian Bach | ehemahligen Capellmeister und Musikdirector | zu Leipzig* (1752).

² Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge* (Berlin: Haude und Spener, vol. 1, 1753; vol. 2, 1754; repr., Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2004). French edition (trans. by Marpurg): *Traité de la Fugue et du Contrepoint* (Berlin: Haude und Spener, 1756).

³ Matthew Dirst, *Engaging Bach: The Keyboard Legacy from Marpurg to Mendelssohn* (Cambridge: Cambridge

during his lifetime as “unnatural”, Bach’s music became, by century’s end, a paradigm of “natural” expression [...].⁴ It must be noted here that the purpose of using this term is two-fold. The first involves expression, that is, ‘smooth harmonic and rhythmic contour, its predictable phrase units and its easy fit with the countersubject’⁵, while the second is ‘unity of diversity’ or ‘growth from a single generating cell into a complex organism’,⁶ as in the fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Due to such ambiguity surrounding this term, it cannot be easily concluded from Dirst’s description that the understanding of Bach’s music completely changed in a single context, especially concerning the concept of ‘natural’. However, the following will show that this concept had a decisive influence on the way people understood Bach’s music.

As Dirst indicated, neither counterpoint nor Bach’s music was necessarily considered as ‘natural’, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century. As for counterpoint, prominent reformative writers, such as Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729) and Johann Mattheson (1681–1764), criticised music that was formulated by strict contrapuntal rules as ‘artificial art’, based on the viewpoint that argued the predominance of *sensus* over *ratio*. In addition, Johann Adolph Scheibe (1708–1776)’s well-known criticism of Bach’s music shows that at least some critics considered that ‘the natural element’ was absent from his music due to its ‘turgid and confused style.’⁷ However, the following observation presents a new recognition of Bach’s music through another implication of the term ‘natural’, which was uncommon before the time of Marpurg’s writings.

II. The Introduction of the *Art of Fugue*

In the introduction of *The Art of Fugue*, Marpurg emphasises the superiority of Bach’s ability as a performer due to ‘his astonishing facility in invention and improvisation’ and ‘his performance, equally excellent in all keys in the most difficult passages and figures.’⁸ Then, he praises Bach as a composer:

But if one looks into his works, one could also draw the conclusion, taking into consideration everything that has ever come to pass in music past or present, that no one has surpassed him in thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of harmony, or, I may say, in the deep and thoughtful execution of unusual, ingenious ideas, far removed from the ordinary run, and yet spontaneous and natural; I say natural, meaning those ideas which must, by their profundity, their connection and their organization, meet with the acclaim of any taste, no matter of what country. A melody which agrees only with canons of taste obtaining at a particular time and place has value only so long as that taste prevails. Let it but suit the fancy to take more pleasure in a different turn

University Press, 2012), p. 4.

⁴ Dirst, *Engaging Bach*, p. 4. Here, Dirst paraphrases Marpurg’s description of Bach’s fugue (BWV 890/2) as ‘How pleasant is the main subject, how natural, how well distinguished from the countersubject!’ in *Kritische Briefe über die Tonkunst* (BDok III, Nr. 701).

⁵ Dirst, *Engaging Bach*, pp. 13–14.

⁶ Dirst, *Engaging Bach*, p. 32.

⁷ *NBR*, no. 343.

⁸ *NBR*, no. 374.

of expression, and that taste falls by the wayside. Natural and cogent thoughts remain their worth in all times and places. Such thoughts are to be found in all the pieces that ever flowed from the pen of the late Mr. Bach. The present work testifies anew to this fact.⁹

According to Marpurg, Bach's music is to be praised by everyone, regardless of their musical taste, since it is 'natural'. If a melody only corresponds to musical taste based on a particular time and place, then the melody might be regarded as being without good taste when musical taste changes. However, Marpurg shows that Bach's music does not only correspond with musical taste but also states that it should be universally accepted because it is written under his 'natural' invention. As stated earlier, this usage of 'natural' was uncommon before Marpurg's writings. Moreover, it is important to note that, by using this term, he does not mean the opposite of the artificial by this term. Rather, he most likely means the 'unity of diversity' by stating 'their profundity, their connection and their organization'. What is considered original with Marpurg's writing is that, in the context of Bach criticism, he added the connotation that what is 'natural' can be considered as 'universal'.

The argument that Bach's music should be universally accepted was previously mentioned in *Der critische Musicus an der Spree*,¹⁰ written two years earlier than the introduction of *The Art of Fugue*. He states that 'the foreigners regard, for example, the immortal taste of Bach in Leipzig as an original taste and does not think it originated from the imitation of the other country's tastes.'¹¹ It is true that, in this case, this description appears in the discussion of the original taste of German music, and he does not use the term 'natural'. However, Marpurg's intention to praise and propagate Bach's music, due to its universality and immortality, can be seen in the early stages of his career as a music critic.

III. *Abhandlung von der Fuge*

In 1753 and 1754, Marpurg published two volumes of *Abhandlung von der Fuge*, the second volume of which was dedicated to Bach's two sons, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–1784) and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788). In this treatise, the fugue is voluminously discussed using not only examples from J. S. Bach but also from others who were regarded as masters of fugue writing during those days. Unlike the theoretical treatises on counterpoint written by composers, such as *Institutioni harmoniche* (Venice, 1558) by Gioseffo Zarlino (1517–1590), *Documenti armonici* (Bologna, 1687) by Angelo Berardi (c. 1636–1694) and *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Vienna, 1725) by Johann Joseph Fux (1660–1741), in which the description of the fugue was limited to the final part of the treatises because imitative art and canon were discussed as well as fugue, Marpurg treats the fugue as a central subject, as shown in the title of his book.¹²

Although this treatise is not limited to the fugues of Bach, it was probably expected to supplement

⁹ NBR, no. 374.

¹⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Der critische Musicus an der Spree* (Berlin: Haude und Spener, 1749–1750).

¹¹ Marpurg, *Der critische Musicus an der Spree*, p. 357 (in 'Fortsetzung der Anmerkungen über den Geschmack der Italiäner', pp. 351–358); *BDok* II, Nr. 591.

¹² Michael Heinemann, 'Introduction', in Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge*, ed. by Michael Heinemann (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2004).

‘practical musical art works’¹³ (that is, J. S. Bach’s *Art of Fugue*) from a theoretical perspective since C. P. E. Bach stated (when he sold a copperplate of this piece in 1756) that, ‘it is the most perfect practical fugal work, and that every student of the art, with the help of a good theoretical instruction book, such as the one by Marpurg, must necessarily learn from it to make a good fugue.’¹⁴ Indeed, this treatise was reprinted three times (in 1806, 1843 and 1858) in Germany and once (in 1801) in France (whose first edition was published in 1756). Marpurg himself admitted in the introduction of the second volume of this treatise (1754) that, ‘I had a wrong thought. The successful passing of my treatise [the first volume of *Abhandlung von der Fuge*] taught me that there are still today many enthusiasts of the artificial writing of music.’¹⁵ This statement suggests that the treatise was widely accepted and read among the dilettante of music as soon as it was published. Furthermore, this might strengthen Marpurg’s argument of the fugue’s universality since many people were still interested in the fugue even though some critics recognised it as ‘old-fashioned’.

In the introduction of the first volume (1753), Marpurg explains his intention of writing as if he was defending himself against the critics of counterpoint.

I notice that one *Philomusus*, a lover of operatic counterpoint, is sharpening his pen against me. When he hears the word fugue, he makes [the sign of the] cross, and regards the composition of the same as a handcraft, as though other kinds of musical composition required no rules. His every other word is melody and taste. Who would not take him at his word that he is the greatest melodist and that he has a monopoly on taste? Speak to him of the canon. A shudder runs through him. He thinks that the century in which this part of musical composition was especially practiced was barbaric. He believes that the church pieces done in this style by Fux, Palestrina, Lotti, Scacchi, and many others to be the fruits of dementia¹⁶. They occasionally snap terms such as “musical box” and “obligation of study”.¹⁷

Marpurg also criticises the type of people who dislike fugues and canons. In addition, he states that they are only interested in melody and taste, and they do not accept the values of fugues and canons composed by great musicians such as Fux, Giovanni Pierluigi Palestrina (c. 1525–1594), Marco Scacchi (1602–1662) and Antonio Lotti (1667–1740). Furthermore, he mentioned that, when criticising, they only use the terms ‘musical box’, ‘obligation of study’ and ‘pedantry’, which were considered cliché by the first half of the eighteenth-century music theorists, such as Heinichen and Mattheson, who frequently used them to criticise contrapuntal works. Furthermore, Marpurg states that those who criticise counterpoint dislike ‘anything that causes pain’,¹⁸ and he attempts to refute such deep-rooted criticism of

¹³ *NBR*, no. 376.

¹⁴ *NBR*, no. 376.

¹⁵ Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge*, vol. 2, p. i.

¹⁶ English translation of *Der critische Musicus an der Spree* largely based on below: Howard Jay Serwer, ‘Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (1718–1795): music critic in a galant age’ (unpublished thesis, Yale University, 1968), pp. 123–124.

¹⁷ Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge*, vol. 1, p. ii.

¹⁸ Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge*, vol. 1, p. iv.

counterpoint as follows:

When he doesn't shake his ideas out of his sleeve, he shakes them out of the scores of other people. But then, doesn't the free manner of writing also cost some pains? Do those excellent men who enrich the world everyday with tasteful *galant* pieces scribble them while standing on the leg?¹⁹

Here, Marpurg argues that not only fugues but also even *galant* pieces²⁰ cause some pain, that is, the elaboration of the pieces. Therefore, the necessity of elaboration cannot be the reason for preferring *galant* music over fugue. He also believes that, if these opponents dislike fugues because of their elaboration, then they should not prefer *galant* pieces as well. In this manner, Marpurg refuted those who criticised fugues in the age when *galant* music prospered to show the significance of fugues regardless of what taste was prevalent.

His argument that fugues should not be recognised as an outdated style can be seen when he lists the names of the unknown composers as well as the well-known ones. The pieces of the less famous composers are not often properly acknowledged since most people judged music not according to their senses but according to the tastes of certain people or countries.²¹ Marpurg's attempt to present examples from a wide range of composers shows his intention that the fugue in general should be judged appropriately regardless of which composer (famous or lesser-known, old or new) wrote them.

The introduction of the German edition was so voluminous that the discussions sometimes appear complicated, whereas that of the French edition showed his motivation for writing more clearly. This seems partly because this edition was a revised version of the original. Marpurg explains as follows:

With the publication of this text, it is my intention to make the rules for the composition of a musical art form—which have remained one and the same for everyone—more widely known, disregarding the various national tastes in music. Of all the genres of musical composition, only the fugue is not subject to the moods of fashion. The passing of centuries has not changed it, and fugues composed a hundred years ago still have an appeal as if they had been composed today.²²

Here, he explains that the fugues should not be perceived as 'old-fashioned,' regardless of their age, since this genre has a certain level of immortality. He also argues that the compositional art of the fugue is common among the different countries. The expression in the French edition of *Abhandlung*, 'the moods of fashion,' means the same as 'the fancy to take more pleasure in a different turn of expression,' which appears in the introduction of the *Art of Fugue*. These similar expressions explain Marpurg's

¹⁹ Serwer, 'Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg', pp. 124–125.

²⁰ Serwer indicates that Marpurg here uses 'galant pieces' in the opposite sense of fugues. He also argues that no pejorative connotation can be found in the word *galant* (Serwer, 'Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg', p. 125). However, the phrase 'galant triple, quadruple counterpoint' (Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge*, vol. 1, p. xviii) indicates that the meaning of *galant* cannot be simply explained.

²¹ Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge*, vol. 1, pp. x–xi.

²² The English translation of the French edition of *Abhandlung* is based on Heinemann's introduction to the reprint.

intention to consider fugues as beyond the concepts of fashion or taste. In this way, he emphasises the immortality and universality of the fugue more straightforwardly in the French edition than in the German version.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the theorist and composer Marpurg propagated the significance of the fugue and Bach's music by arguing its universality. Such a thought was initially presented in his introduction to the second edition of the *Art of Fugue* with the term 'natural', and it was quickly followed by his *Abhandlung von der Fuge*. At the beginning of this process, a new connotation of the term 'natural' as universal played a significant role. He concentrated on 'the connection and the organization' of Bach's music and considered them 'natural' and therefore 'universal'. Similarly, he regarded fugues to be universally accepted. In this way, he changed the recognition of not only Bach's music but also that of the fugues and argued that both the fugue and Bach's music could be better understood beyond the limitations of periods, trends and nations. Such recognition by Marpurg created a new mode of understanding Bach's music and strengthened the connection between his music and fugue, that is, Bach's image as a fugue composer. Although further investigation on the questions regarding how the recognition of fugue as a characteristic of German music by Marpurg and Mattheson²³ can be explained in relation to the universality of fugue and what made Marpurg propose its universality is indispensable, it can be concluded at least that Marpurg played an essential role as an initiator of the reception of Bach's music as a whole.

MATSUBARA Kaoru
The University of Tokyo

²³ Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Gedanken über die welschen Tonkünstler* (Halberstadt: Christian Ernst Immanuel Weldige, 1751), pp. 5–6. Johann Mattheson, *Philologisches Tresepiel* (Hamburg: Johann Adolph Martini, 1752), p. 98; *BDok* III, Nr. 647.