

Interview with Kei Koito

Why did you choose a French organ to record *The Art of Fugue*?

It was really the work of Marpurg that inspired the musical and artistic conception of this recording. He was a great admirer of Bach, a friend of Voltaire and d'Alembert, and a defender both of the polyphonic style that culminated in Bach's work and of the theories of Rameau.

Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (1718-1797) made an important contribution to the gradual spread of knowledge and scholarship in favour of a better understanding of Bach's music (*Bach-Bewegung*) immediately after the composer's death. He was one of the most famous theoreticians and writers on music of his time. The temperament that bears his name was even adopted for some French historic organs. There are commentaries on two of the mirror fugues from *The Art of Fugue* in his *Abhandlung von der Fuge* (Berlin, 1753-1754), which was translated into French under the title of *Traité de la fugue et du contrepoint divisé en deux parties* (Berlin, 1756): *All the different voices are*

heard without interruption, each with as much force as the others [...]

Surely Bach's wonderfully limpid style is well served by the clarity of the tonal colours of the French organ, especially the Dom Bedos instrument in Bordeaux (1748), so magnificently restored by the firm of Pascal Quoirin. My choice is an audacious one, associating Bach's masterpiece with the French classical instrument of Dom Bedos, itself one of the crowning glories of organ-building.

How did you deal with the difficulties associated with this kind of instrument?

I treated them as organists did at the time, as for example in the case of the *Praeludium in E.b Pedaliter* by Bruhns (1665-1697). Hence the missing first C sharp is compensated by the second C sharp, and in the canon by augmentation in contrary motion I used the 16' manual bombarde to take the part for the trompette of the *grand-orgue* down to the low B. The existence of this note in *The Art of Fugue* is one of the arguments used in favour of playing the

work exclusively on the harpsichord. However, the ravalement to bottom F (except for the four foundation stops) of the Dom Bedos pedalboard with its thirty-six keys (the bombarde only exists from bottom A upwards, whereas the two trompettes and the clairon exist for all thirty-six keys) leaves that argument open to question. This same bottom B can also be found in the G major Fantasia (BWV 572), a most unusual and absolutely unique work for the organ. Bach is known to have given it its French subtitle himself (*Pièce d'orgue*), and its three movements are also headed in French (*Très vite*, *Gravement* and *Lentement*).

As far as the pedals are concerned, I have adopted a very different solution from the one generally employed, where the bass is too prominent because the pedals are used nearly all the time. The work frequently has a very low tenor part. If the true bass then receives too much emphasis, there is an inevitable risk of confusion between the two parts, and the result is bottom-heavy. This would produce the

very opposite of the clarity necessary in such a complex contrapuntal texture. So the pedals are used occasionally, allowing me to make the bass line lighter, but also to reinforce it, if need be. This corresponds with the advice given by Dom Bedos, when he mentions the case of the plenum: 'One can sometimes accompany the *Plein-jeu* with foundation stops (flûte) in place of the pedal trompette and clairon, particularly when 16' tone is present.' This means that contrary to the usual registration for a plainchant theme in the tenor (the *grand Plein-jeu* with pedal reeds for the *cantus firmus*), one may simply underline the pedal bass at strategic points in a piece for the *Plein-jeu*.

Could you tell us a little more about your registrations?

I have deliberately chosen the *meslanges* and combinations used by the French classical school towards the end of the eighteenth century as they are listed in the *Art du facteur d'orgue* by Dom Bedos (Paris, 1766-1770), and applied them to the very specific styles of *The Art of Fugue*. I have tried to find the perfect

balance between this constantly fluctuating style and a group of fairly rigid forms such as the *Grand jeu* (with rich and distinct tone-colour in the bass and brilliant treble), the *Plein-jeu* (a sound that is at the same time moving, poetic and majestic), as well as the *Duo*, *Trio*, *Quatuor*, *Fugue grave*, *Fugue de mouvement*, *Basse de trompette* or *cromorne*, and the *Récit de tierce* or *trompette*. Some of these traditional forms were already cited by Mersenne in 1636-37 in the chapter called 'Le traité des instruments de musique' in *L'Harmonie universelle*. So the various tone-colours of the instrument all receive appropriate attention.

Does this approach make it easier to understand such a complex texture?

Certainly, particularly the mirror fugues. If one places the score of this kind of fugue vertically on a horizontally positioned mirror, the *inversus* fugue can be read in the mirror. At the meeting-point, the two fugues are perfectly symmetrical, each note corresponding to its counterpart. But the remarkable aspect of this phenomenon is that each fugue is a splendid piece of music, just as

if it had been written separately. Because the crossing of the voice-parts makes it hard to follow the lines clearly all the time (for instance in *contrapunctus* 12), these fugues gain considerably if they are played by a quartet of different instruments or manuals. The solution of the French classical organ quartet (requiring the simultaneous use of three manuals and pedals, and hence the services of a second organist) enables one to provide a different and distinctive tone-colour for each line and obtain a greater richness of sound. That is why I asked Kenneth Weiss to play the third hand at various stages (12^{1,2} and 13^{1,2} in the present recording): the ideal tonal solution in this context, but clearly impossible for an unaided organist.

How did you decide which order to use?

We do not know exactly what order Bach himself planned to use for the pieces in this collection. The various attempts to establish the right order are pure speculation. Using the original edition, I took the liberty of assembling fifteen *contrapuncti* in four groups that are very closely linked thematically: the

'straightforward' fugues (1-4), the counter-fugues, where the answer is an inversion of the subject (5-7), the double fugues (8-11) and the mirror fugues (12^{1,2}, 13^{1,2}). Then I decided on the order of each movement, respecting the pairs of fugues (subject and inversion: *rectus* & *inversus*), and inserted the four canons between the four groups of fugues mentioned earlier on. I have endeavoured to respect their sense of continuity (*rectus* always being followed by *inversus*) as well as their tonal role in relation to the other *contrapuncti*, by arranging them progressively according to the overall effect. I ended the sequence with the three-part fugue (14) because it is certainly the composer's signature, and possibly even his musical testament.

You chose to respect the fact that the last fugue is unfinished. Is this because you thought it impossible for anyone to complete the work?

Yes - out of sheer respect for the manuscript, which breaks off at bar 239. Any further attempts are speculation: it is always possible to

complete an unfinished fugue, but it would obviously not be the composer's own work. Certain hypotheses can, however, be envisaged. In the first part of the *contrapunctus* there are several B.A.C.H. formulae (B flat, A, C, B natural). In the second part (bar 114), B.A. and C.H. are kept apart and situated over a broad version of the theme. The third part (bar 193) begins straight away with the notes B.A.C.H. which appear complete for the first time in that order. There is an interruption after the three themes are first heard combined together; judging by the manuscript, one can suppose that the last fragment of the *rectus* version of the triple fugue is missing, or the *inversus* fugue, or possibly, if a fully-developed fugue had been intended, both the *rectus* and the *inversus* of the quadruple fugue.

Are the temperament of the organ, and indeed the instrument itself, suitable for the complex harmony of the work and the subtle varieties of touch it calls for?

The eleventh and fourteenth *contrapuncti*, like the *ricercars* in *The*

Musical Offering or the twenty-fifth of the *Goldberg Variations*, are beautifully composed but at the same time quite avant-garde. If the chromatic passages or the chord progressions surprise the ear on first hearing because of the Dom Bedos temperament, the wonderful contrast is even more arresting when the concordant passage returns. Moreover, one should not forget that the key of D minor in *The Art of Fugue* (with its extremely sober and deliberate subject in *stile antico*) constitutes a magnificent parallel to the extraordinary gravity of the first church mode with its final, D and dominant, A. This mode was extensively used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its character being referred to as 'gravis'.

Concerning the sensitivity of touch, for example in the ending, aspiration and suspension of held notes, as Couperin points out in *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*, these effects can also be obtained at the organ. If one does not abuse held notes, there are many ways of attacking and especially of ending a sound. The performer can obtain a considerable

diversity of touch at the organ when guided by his ear.

Do you feel that The Art of Fugue is easy to adapt to the acoustics of a church and to a French organ?

Given the acoustics of a church, and thus of a building set aside for a spiritual purpose, the melodic lines of a work that is sometimes vertically dense and at other times more rarefied, can be remarkably conveyed even when the texture is extremely elaborate.

In the light of my experience of playing the work on a French classical organ, I should like to say that if we consider *The Art of Fugue* to be the apotheosis of Bach's entire work, we are entitled to disagree with Mattheson's opinion that Germany is the 'only true land of the organ and of fugue'.