

REGULAR COUNTERSUBJECTS IN FUGUE

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Ex. 1a.

answer

regular countersubject

Ex. 1b.

regular countersubject

third entry of subject

Ex. 2.

regular countersubject

Initial tonal adjustment in answer

regular countersubject

third entry of subject

THIS ARTICLE is designed to be a sequel to my essay, “The Fugal Answer,” found in the April 2006 issue of TAO. Refer back to that article for definitions of, and discussions on, “tonal” and “real” answers and “initial” and “terminal” tonal adjustments (and please correct the unfortunate musical typo in Example 1 of that article: the clef of the lower system should be a transposed tenor clef, not a bass clef!). If you do not have access to this article, please refer to a standard text on fugal composition. I will, however, restate the definitions of “initial” and “terminal” tonal adjustments here. In a fugal answer, an “initial” tonal adjustment is the alteration of one or more pitches near the beginning of the fugal subject to highlight the relationship between the tonic and dominant pitches in the home scale, and/or the keys built on those pitches; in the answer of a fugal with a modulating subject, a “terminal” tonal adjustment is a pitch adjustment, gen-

erally toward the end of the subject, designed to steer the answer back to the tonic key (after it had commenced in the dominant).

A “countersubject” is, as the word suggests, a melodic idea—*any* melodic idea, whether or not it recurs—which appears as a counterpoint to the subject of a fugue. A countersubject is “regular” if, after being introduced during the second statement of the subject (i.e., the answer), it reappears during all subsequent subject entries in the exposition section of the fugue, and during a clear majority of later statements (not necessarily every statement) of the subject. It acts, in effect, like a steady companion or shadow of the subject. In the exposition, it always will appear in the voice that had just stated the subject previously. Thus, Voice 1 will present the regular countersubject while Voice 2 states the subject; Voice 2 will then present the regular countersubject while Voice 3 states the subject; if there is a fourth voice,

Voice 3 will present the regular countersubject while Voice 4 states the subject; etc.

A regular countersubject, in order to be a law-abiding element in the polyphonic fabric, must obey all traditional rules of counterpoint (the 18th-century variety, since we look, above all, to Bach’s fugues as models): parallel octaves, fifths, and unisons with the subject (or any other voice) must be eschewed, dissonances properly prepared and resolved according to late-Baroque guidelines, and the total range covered by the melody should be modest, generally not exceeding a twelfth. To enjoy a profile sufficiently independent of the fugue subject, the countersubject should offer significant contrast to the subject in matters such as rhythms featured, pitch contour, and melodic interval content. More often than not, it should run in contrary or oblique motion relative to the subject. While not necessarily as distinctive or memorable a melodic

Ex. 3a.

answer
initial tonal adjustment in answer
regular countersubject

Ex. 3b.

regular countersubject
third entry of subject

Ex. 4a.

regular countersubject
answer
splice point in subject

Ex. 4b.

regular countersubject
splice point in countersubject
third entry of subject

conception as the subject, it should nonetheless be easily recognizable. In addition, since, during the course of the fugue, the regular countersubject will inevitably have occasion to appear both above and below the subject, it must obey the traditional laws of double (“invertible”) counterpoint, in order to behave acceptably in both vertical arrangements. Thirds, sixths, octaves, unisons, and their octave compounds may be employed as consonances as always, since their intervallic inversions within the octave are also consonant; seconds, sevenths, ninths, diminished and augmented intervals, and their octave compounds can also be used, as long as they follow traditional behavior as dissonances (i.e., are properly prepared and resolved). Perfect fifths, on the other hand, must be avoided, unless prepared and resolved as if they were *dissonances*, since their inversions are fourths—dissonances in 18th-century language. (Please note: I am re-

stricting my discussion to double counterpoint *at the octave*, which is only one, though by far the most common, of three traditional species of double counterpoint. The other two species, double counterpoint at the twelfth and at the tenth, are rarely found in fugues—Fugues 9 and 10 of Bach’s *The Art of Fugue* are notable exceptions. In those other two species of double counterpoint, different vertical intervals must be avoided or given special care.)

If the answer to a fugue subject is “real,” rather than “tonal,” finding the correct form of a regular countersubject in its later appearances poses no problem. It will simply be an exact transposition of its original form:

See Example 1a and 1b

Since the regular countersubject is first encountered during the second presentation of the subject, it will usually be mainly in the

dominant key area at that point. The next appearance of the regular countersubject will, however, be back in the tonic key, during the time the third voice has its crack at the subject. Thus, the second presentation of the regular countersubject will essentially be a transposition of the first presentation down a fifth or up a fourth.

If the fugue subject is non-modulating, but its answer contains an initial tonal adjustment (cf. my April 2006 article), an exact transposition of the first presentation of the countersubject down a fifth or up a fourth still usually fills the bill. A survey of regular countersubjects in Bach’s *Well-tempered Clavier* reveals, surprisingly, that many of them do not begin their pattern of recurrence until at least one beat after the start of the subject. (Note, for example, the regular countersubject in Example 1 above.) In the pattern of recurrence, the most important aspect of the relationship between the two voices is

apparently not how they begin but rather their interaction as the cadence at the end of the subject is approached. Since most initial tonal adjustments involve only the first or second note of the subject, these adjustments are therefore often completed before the countersubject begins. Consider, for example, the second and third entries in the *Fugue in C-sharp Major*, Book I:

See Example 2

In other cases of initial tonal adjustments, Bach finds it possible to preserve an exact transposition of the regular countersubject even though there is an overlap between the beginning of the countersubject (i.e., its pattern of recurrence) and the initial tonal adjustment: this can happen if a note in the countersubject on an important part of a beat functions as a consonance in the first appearance of the countersubject, then as a properly behaving dissonance in the next appearance (or vice versa). Consider, in the following example, the 16th note appearing in the countersubject against the fourth note of the subject:

See Example 3a and 3b

It is a sixth in its first appearance, but a ninth (accented passing tone) in the next.

If the fugue subject modulates to the dominant key, then things tend to be a bit more

complicated. The regular countersubject usually must undergo a tonal adjustment corresponding to the terminal tonal adjustment found in the answer. (An exception occurs when the terminal adjustment is very early in the subject—e.g., in the *Fugue in G-sharp Minor*, *Well-tempered Clavier*, Book I—in which case the situation is similar to a quickly executed initial adjustment.) Fitted to the tonal-answer form of the subject in its first appearance, the regular countersubject must now be fitted to the *original* form of the subject. To accomplish this, one must look for a “splice-point” in the countersubject coinciding (or almost coinciding) with the splice-point in the answer. At the splice-point you have chosen, begin to state all subsequent pitches *one scale-step higher* than they would have been in an exact transposition, in order to wind up in the dominant key (as the subject does in its third entry) rather than the subdominant:

See Example 4a and 4b

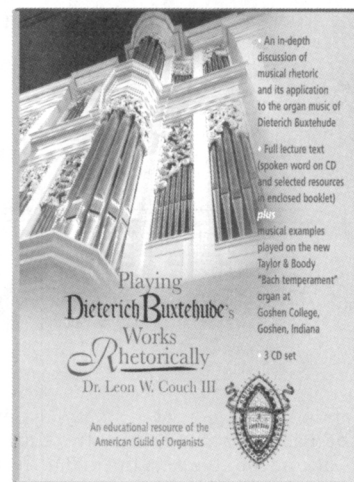
Regular countersubjects are not found in all fugues—in fact, among the 48 fugues of the two books of the *Well-tempered Clavier*, over 20 (i.e., close to 50%) do not have them. While an attractive regular countersubject is often a major asset for a fugue, the absence of one is not necessarily a shortcoming, and indeed, some of Bach’s most masterly fugues do not have them.

In particular, regular countersubjects tend not to be found in fugues in which “special tricks” such as stretto, augmentation, and melodic inversion are extensively featured, because the implementation of these devices deprives the countersubject of the contrapuntal space needed for its presentation, or else alters the rhythmic or harmonic environment of the subject, making survival of the countersubject impossible. Also, double and triple fugues almost never possess regular countersubjects, because the second (and third) subjects themselves function, in effect, as glorified regular countersubjects when combined with the opening subject. One beautiful exception is the *Fugue in F Major* for organ (from the *Tocatta and Fugue in F Major*), a double fugue that does offer a regular countersubject to its opening subject for all instances where it is not combined with the second subject, though it then yields the stage when the two main subjects are combined.

Since a regular countersubject is clearly not a universal requirement for successful fugue writing, it may well be asked why it has become such a hard-and-fast tradition to ask for one on the fugue questions of the Guild’s advanced certification examinations. Our response must surely be that it is because this requirement tests, in admirably short space, the candidate’s grasp and mastery of so many fundamental contrapuntal and harmonic aspects of our tonal language.

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