

Playing Contrapuntal Works on Organ and Piano

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One aspect to playing fugues, canons, and such that I have learned to avoid, is the over-conservative style associated with these rigorous forms. I have always found it boring when hearing a steady stream of seemingly meaningless eighths and quarters with no sense of how they form a structure. Some performance practices that I have learned to infuse into my playing (although they may not be all necessarily period performance methods) include tempo changes (both over the course of a work and in particular dramatic spots), ornamentation (to emphasize or bring out particular voices or events that I find valuable to conveying the emotional impact of the section) of all kinds, inventive articulation to separate and distinguish voices which in many cases have similar musical profiles, and even improvisation (e.g. at the end of the *Contrapunctus I* of *Die Kunst der Fuge* where there are those conspicuous rests; albeit they have a certain dramatic weight should they be left as measured silence, I believe that they were intended as cadenza areas).

Although based on ornamental, articulation, and improvisational procedures and archetypes of period music, I try not to limit my imagination to these learned styles, but rather allow the idea of personal interpretation to be integrally entwined into my playing. This is especially evident in my approach to tempi, which fluctuate probably much more than the period styles would indicate. However, I can justify my approach by taking hints from the masters of the past who always dealt with materials and performance in new and interesting ways (as is described by contemporaries of Sweelinck, Scheidt, Buxtehude, and Bach). In fact, to try to just reproduce their musical impulses in playing I think is not in the spirit of their work, regardless of the genre being formal (such as *ricercars*, fugues, or canonic works) or freer in style (fantasias and the like).

Another aspect to be careful of is being ‘too’ consistent, meaning, for example, that if one plays the same ornament at the same parts of the theme every time, it becomes predictable and adds redundancy to the subject rather than bringing any new dimension to that particular statement. The same of course should be applied to tempi and articulation

issues. Ornamenting in particular I find to be especially useful to bring out an inner theme or to emphasize a unique harmonic moment.

In regards to preparing a work for performance, another issue is how many of the above elements should be pre-programmed into the playing? I believe that is where improvisation also comes into play; although many of the ornaments and articulations and tempo fluctuations that I deem are of utmost importance to my interpretation, I allow myself the freedom to introduce new elements directly as I perform, although always staying in the constraint of taste and expression of the unfolding musical drama.

Lastly, one note on tempo should be examined, that being of context. A good example can be found in the above mentioned *Die Kunst der Fuge*: when playing excerpts (like a performance I am planning on giving in November 2000 to include I, II, III, two of the canons, and V) *Contrapunctus I* should be taken more briskly to set the pace for the set. But if the work is to be played in its entirety, I believe *I* should be taken with a more reticent tempo, to properly prepare the listener for the cycle and also not exhaust the idea of a quick tempo since many interior sections deserve such a treatment. In all, the tempi should be calculated in regards to the drama of the concert or set.

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NB The theme of a contrapuntal work is not necessarily the most interesting factor - so don't feel compelled to emphasize it whenever it appears; I believe one of the more graceful aspects of contrapuntal texture is the manner in which an overall shape can appear through the inter-weaving of individual strands, each with equal significance.

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