

The Art of Fugue (BWV 1080) at the Duo-Clavichord



The duo-clavichord is a case study in Joel Speerstra's current research project "Creative Keyboards." The instrument was designed to encourage early keyboard musicians to play more in ensemble together. The clavichord itself as a phenomenon demands both a level of technical development from the performer and critical listening from the audience beyond the other historical keyboards.

The duo-clavichord was built in 2014 by Speerstra and Per-Anders Terning. It contains two independent clavichords with two keyboards directly across from each other in the same case. The design is based on a single keyboard instrument by

Silbermann, a favorite builder of Bach's second son Carl Philipp Emanuel. The clavichord itself as a phenomenon has certain affordances that other keyboard instruments do not have. It is the only historical keyboard instrument before the invention of the piano where it was possible to control dynamics of individual notes through touch, but this affordance comes at a technical price. Because each pair of strings must be lifted a little bit every time a note is played – making an ergonomic and well-controlled technique a necessity for tone production, – it has always been prized as an important teacher for the other keyboard instruments.

Within the “Creative Keyboards” project, Speerstra and Davidsson expected to explore the rich repertoire written by J. S. Bach, his sons, and students intended for two keyboards, but because the instrument functions like a symbiotic whole rather than two individual keyboards, it inspired the performers to start looking at other repertoire as well. One piece that falls in the space between keyboard and ensemble repertoire is Bach's “Art of Fugue.” It contains movements that are clearly for two keyboards, but the majority of the work is in open score for two, three, and four voices, and some of it is extremely difficult to adapt for a single performer. One obvious solution is to treat it as an ensemble piece for two keyboardists. In our project, each performer took two voices in the four-voice contrapuncti and one voice each in the two-voice canonic movements.

The work was performed in on the duo-clavichord three times in 2018.

June 7, 2018

At the International Orgelpark in cooperation with the Dutch Clavichord Society:
“Clavichord & Organ: Companions for Centuries”

July 15, 2018

As a lecture-recital at the 18th Biennial International Conference on Baroque Music in
Cremona, Italy

October 18, 2018

At the Göteborg International Organ Academy at the Academy of Music and Drama,
GU.



Performance experiments.

One of the most important reflections from this working period is how the duo-clavichord allowed the performers to use micro-dynamics to make each entrance of the theme, in all of its permutations, audible to one another, and to the listeners. The primary starting point for the interpretation was to always let the statement of the theme have preference dynamically, and when the performers were never responsible for more than two voices at a time, this goal was always manageable.

The clavichord is often referred to in historical sources as the best instrument to prepare repertoire for the other keyboard instruments, and at the conference in Amsterdam we got to spontaneously test this theory. The opening concert for the conference was cancelled at the last minute and we volunteered to play instead, taking the first four contrapuncti as four-hand two-manual pieces at the new Utopa Baroque organ (based on organs that would have been known to J. S. Bach by Zacharias Hildebrandt). This instrument was voiced by Munetaka Yokota, a long-time collaborator on instrument research at the University of Gothenburg. **Music Example 1** is a live recording of the performance of Contrapunctus 4, with the soprano and tenor voice played on the eight-foot gamba on Manual 2. The gamba is challenging many organists because Yokota has set it with stringy extremely slow speech and characteristic sandy sustained sound that is rarely found in new organs, but is clearly present in some historical models. The alto and bass voices were played on the eight-foot Gedackt flute on Manual 1. The strong contrast between the two tone colors makes it possible to follow the structure of the piece, giving clarity even to passages where the theme appears in stretto divided by a single quarter-note (as in the 13th and

14th, and 15th and 16th entrances of the theme). **Music Example 2** is a live recording of Contrapunctus 9 from the same concert, at the duo clavichord demonstrating how the instrument with its varied dynamics can function like a lute, or guitar duo, bringing out the themes at various speeds and levels of dynamics. This project will result in a full recording of the work at the duo clavichord (and perhaps, now, the organ) in 2019 with an accompanying essay.