Special exhibition

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Beethoven and the Art of Fugue

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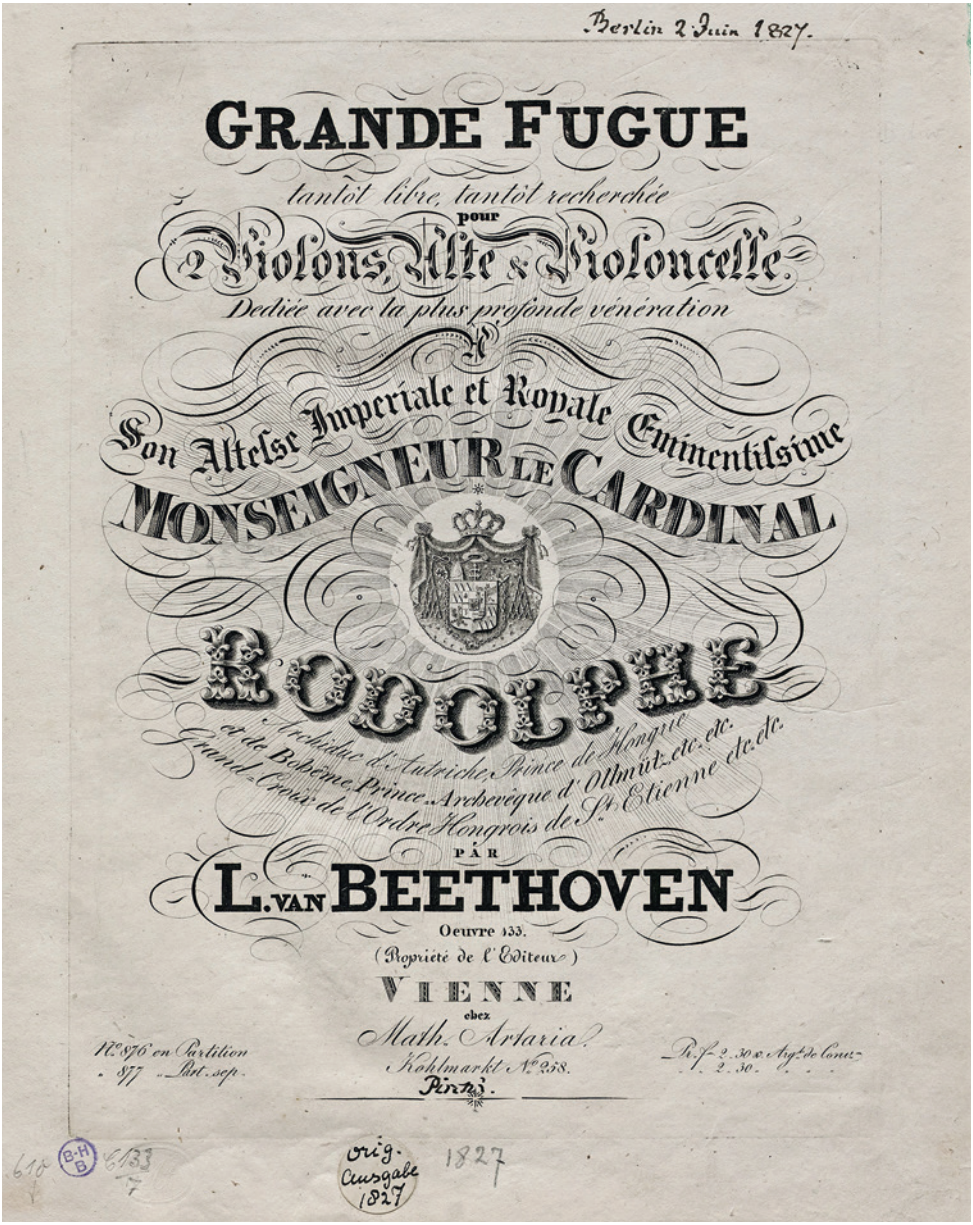
Beethoven and the fugue? This may come as a surprise, since the term “fugue” is usually associated with Johann Sebastian Bach, perhaps other great composers, but certainly not automatically with Ludwig van Beethoven. Yet Beethoven was a very accomplished and innovative fugue composer who even created a kind of compendium of his own in the succession of Bach.



Great Fugue for string quartet (B-flat major) op. 133, original edition in score, Artara, Wien, 1827

The fugue is a complex musical formal principle of polyphonic composition. It is considered to be the highest musical art form, which is reflected, among other things, in the extensive set of rules. Fugue theory has been part of professional music education for hundreds of years, first as part of counterpoint, the general teaching of how to compose polyphonic music. From the 16th century at the latest it became a building block in its own right and by the middle of the 18th century fugue theory had reached a position that is still valid today. Beethoven and all his teachers had to cram fugues in their music composition lessons, and this is still true for today's music students.

The young Beethoven was already introduced to this compositional technique during his time in Bonn. He became familiar with J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, a model repertoire, but also tried his hand at his own fugues, as early sketches show. Beethoven also studied fugue theory with his teacher Joseph Haydn, for the work samples in the final report of his year of study with Haydn sent to the Elector of Cologne included, among other works, a fugue that is unfortunately lost today. With Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, Beethoven once again undertook a complete, systematic course of study, which was devoted in large part to the theory of fugues. He learned all the techniques of fugal composition from scratch. As his numerous excerpts from treatises on music theory show, Beethoven occupied himself with fugue theory until the end of his life and studied not only Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg's main work on music theory, "Abhandlung von der Fuge" (1753), but also other central treatises such as Johann Philipp Kirnberger's "Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik" (1771–1779) and the works of other theorists. His fascination with this complex form was also reflected in his own work, in which he continually implemented numerous fugue types.

The name comes from the Latin fuga = flight and characterises the essential component. In a fugue, the voices follow each other according to strict rules, whereby a fixed theme is given, which then moves through all the voices at a certain distance and is accompanied by a counter-melody. The best-known and earliest form of the fugue is the canon (in older tracts also called a "circle fugue"): At a fixed interval, all the voices begin with the same theme. Even the actual theme must have a certain construction so that it can be worked out further. Not only the use of the themes and their staggered responses, but also their accompaniment are strictly prescribed. In addition, there are numerous types of fugue, depending on the number of voices, themes and their changes. Thus a theme can be reversed (descending steps become ascending and vice versa), it can be augmented or diminished (the note values change and become faster or slower) or it runs in retrograde, i.e. backwards. The fugue is a highly complex form whose construction requires considerable knowledge and practice. For Beethoven, it was not only a fascinating formal principle, but certainly also a kind of intellectual hobby.

FUGUES IN BEETHOVEN'S WORKS

SHOWCASE 1

1 Variations with fugue for piano (E-flat major) op. 35
Autograph, 1802
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 6

2 Letter to Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig, Vienna, c. 18 December 1802
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Br 58

Before the Variations on his own theme in E-flat major op. 35, Beethoven had already written many other variations; his first work published in print in 1782 was also a variation cycle. Composing variations was Beethoven's "superpower", so to speak. Following the customs of his time, they were perceived as occasional pieces that were not considered worthy of an opus number – they were simply numbered consecutively. Beethoven knew that these new variations were better, and proudly noted on the title: "Since these variations are noticeably different from my earlier v., I did not want them to continue in the manner of these, and instead of indicating them with a No, as with all my other v.[ariations], I have included these among the actual number of my works, all the more so since the themes themselves are also mine." Beethoven gave these variations an opus number because they were new and special. The specialness is also evident in the fact that he crowned the cycle of variations with a fugue at the end (1). The fugue subject is of his own invention, consisting of a bass line and a melody line. Its quality is so high that Beethoven used it in three other compositions: in his Prometheus ballet music, in a contredanse, and in his third symphony, the Eroica. In a letter to his publisher Härtel in Leipzig of 18 October 1802, Beethoven also referred to the "really quite new manner" in which the variations were worked. He was referring to fugue compositions by his colleague Anton Reicha, to which Reicha had added the words "Composés d'après un nouveau système" (composed according to a new model) on the title. Beethoven condemned this new method in the strongest terms, as can be seen in another letter to Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig of 18 December 1802 (2), and consciously distinguished his variations from it: "instead of all the clamour about a new method of v.[ariations], as our neighbours the gallo-Franks would do, as for example a certain [crossed out: Reicha, replaced by:] French composer presented me with fugues après une nouvelle Methode, which consists in the fugue no longer being a fugue, etc – I nevertheless wanted to draw the attention of the non-expert to the fact that at least these V. differ from others".

SHOWCASE 2

3 String quartet (C major) op. 59 no. 3
Autograph, 1805/1806
BH 62

Beethoven concluded the third of the string quartets composed for and commissioned by the Russian diplomat Count Rasumowsky in 1806 with a fugue. Concluding a multi-movement composition with a fugue is not an invention of Beethoven. His teacher Haydn and his model Mozart had already crowned string quartets with fugal finales. This subtly nervous fugue in a fast tempo has something of a perpetual motion machine about it. Many may remember the Literary Quartet, which reviewed books on television in the 1990s under the direction of Marcel Reich-Ranicki, and whose title tune was the beginning of this fugue.

4 Sonata for piano and violoncello (D major) op. 102 no. 2
Copyist's score corrected by the composer, 1815
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 57

Normally sonatas for piano and another instrument were for domestic use. Entertainment in the best sense – light, brilliant, pleasing. The two cello sonatas op. 102 were precisely not that, as the reviewer of the edition published by Simrock in Bonn, the engraver's copy of which can be seen here, noted: "These two sonatas are certainly among the most unusual and peculiar things that have been written for the pianoforte in a long time, not only in this form, but in general. Everything here is different from what one has otherwise received, even from this master himself; however, may he not misinterpret us if we add: not a few things seem to have been arranged in the way they are here, and in the way they are arranged, laid out and distributed, so that they come out completely unusual, completely strange." He also remarked on the last movement of the second sonata that it was very difficult for the pianist to perform, even if he was a practised fugue player. The clever publisher had recognised that such a complicated work required more clarity and had set the cello part above the pianist's notes in small print (see music on the wall). Nowadays this is common practice, but at the time it was so new that the reviewer singled it out for special praise.

SHOWCASE 3

5 Sketches for the Sonata for piano (B-flat major) op. 106
1817/18
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 93

Beethoven's Piano Sonata in B-flat major op. 106, the so-called Hammerklavier Sonata, also has a fugue with a slow introduction as its fourth movement (see music on the wall). Approximately 100 pages of sketches for this movement alone testify to how intensively Beethoven worked on it. The fugue is long and technically very difficult, a challenge for every pianist. Beethoven knew this. When he commissioned his pupil Ferdinand Ries, who lived in London, to find a publisher, he therefore made various suggestions to make the sonata more accessible. One of these suggestions was to omit the fugue altogether and rearrange the other movements. Ries followed this advice. But instead of simply making the fugue disappear, it was published separately in England.

6 Sonata for piano (A-flat major) op. 110, 3rd movement
Autograph, 1821/22
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB BMh 2/42

In his penultimate piano sonata, Beethoven again decided on a fugue as the final movement. Again, he preceded the fugue with a slow introduction – consisting of an Adagio, recitative and an Arioso dolente, i.e. a lament. The fugue, in turn, has several intensifying sections, so that the whole movement seems like the setting of a phoenix rising from the ashes – through night to light. Apparently, the conception of the fugue form was very complex, so that Beethoven needed several attempts to write it down. The Bonn manuscript represents a heavily revised intermediate stage; it is not the last version of the movement and shows significant revisions.

7 33 Variations on a waltz by Anton Diabelli for piano (C major) op. 120
Autograph, 1823
NE 294

Beethoven's first published work in 1782 was a set of piano variations; his last piano work in 1823 would also be variations. With a playing time of almost 60 minutes, it became his most extensive cycle of variations and represents the culmination of his creative work in this field. In 1819, his friend and publisher Anton Diabelli had sent him a little waltz with the request for a single variation. Diabelli had asked 50 other composers for a variation and wanted to publish a collection of all of them. In 1823, Beethoven's work was published separately – instead of one, he had written 33 variations and endowed them with many additional stylistic characteristics such as march, minuet, chorale and even explicitly or

implicitly developing or even parodying models such as Mozart. The Diabelli Variations are a cycle of miniatures that have music about music as their theme. The crowning finale (strictly speaking, the penultimate number) is a fugue, as in op. 35. It is the longest of the variations and of course not a simple fugue. Beethoven designed the 32nd variation as a four-part double fugue, a highly complex art form with two subjects that are processed together with their respective counter subjects and performed in different keys – a brilliant bow to Johann Sebastian Bach and at the same time a self-confident statement of equality.

SHOWCASE 4

8 Sketchbook "De Roda" with sketches for the fugue op. 133
1825
NE 47a

9 String quartet (B-flat major) op. 130
including the Great Fugue op. 133 as last movement
Copyist's score corrected by the composer, 1825/26
BH 90

10 Great Fugue transcribed for piano four-hands (B-flat major) op. 134
Autograph, fragment, 1826
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 25

As with op. 59 no. 3, Beethoven composed a fugue as the final movement of his String quartet in B-flat major op. 130. With its six movements, the quartet was considerably longer than usual. The final fugue, however, with its 741 bars, went beyond all known dimensions, an expansion that naturally also found expression in the sketches, e.g. in the sketchbook "De Roda" (8). After the premiere, the reviewer judged that it seemed to him "incomprehensible, like Chinese". "When the instruments in the regions of the south and north poles have to struggle with immense difficulties, when each of them figures differently and they cross each other per transitum irregularem under a myriad of dissonances, when the players, distrustful of themselves, probably also do not grasp quite in tune, of course, then the Babylonian confusion is complete; […] perhaps the time will come when that which seemed dull and confused to us at first glance will be recognised clearly and in pleasing forms." After the premiere, Beethoven was persuaded to separate the fugue from the quartet and to publish it separately as the "Great Fugue". He composed a new, more pleasing final movement for the string quartet. However, the Russian Prince Galitzin, who commissioned the quartet, was sent the original version of the quartet with the final fugue in the copies intended for him (9). Parallel to the separate publication of the fugue, Beethoven also produced a version for piano four hands (10).

BEETHOVEN'S SKETCHES FOR FUGUES

SHOWCASE 5

11 Sketches for different pieces, including a fugue subject
c. 1790
Collection Wegeler, W 3

"Art is beautiful, but it makes a lot of work" is a quote from 1932 attributed to the Munich comedian Karl Valentin. Beethoven's sketches show in abundance just how much work is involved in art. Beethoven was a meticulous worker, constantly refining or transforming his ideas in a variety of forms until he was satisfied. Since fugues are complex in their construction, their composition requires special preparation. Already in his youth in Bonn, Beethoven tested out fugue subjects he had devised himself. Here he invents a subject in semiquavers, whose suitability for transformation he tests at the end: He wants to increase its note values (augmentation), i.e. slow it down. The idea was probably not pursued further, at least we do not know of a finished piece.

12 Sketches for different pieces and some notes
1807/08
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 75

Improvisation, that is, playing freely without written music, was a popular pastime in Beethoven's time. But only when one could also improvise fugues well was one considered a truly brilliant musician. Beethoven's teacher Albrechtsberger was famous for this; people flocked to his organ concerts because they could hear a master of his craft improvising fugues. This earned him, the Kapellmeister of the Cathedral in Vienna, the honorary title "our Sebastian Bach" in Vienna. His pupil Beethoven was also admired for his improvisations and numerous contemporary reports praise him for his impromptu fugues. However, several documents indicate that he did prepare for these performances in advance. For example, he noted on this sketch sheet: "Song varied[,] at the end fugue and stopped with pianissimo[,] in this way, every fantasy is designed and then performed in the theatre. " His improvisations ("fantasies") were the attraction of every concert. He combined the two essential elements of a good improvisation: variation and fugue. A theme, in this case a song, is first varied in various forms and finally also performed in a fugue.

13 Sketches for an unfinished fugue for string quintet, Unv 7
Fragment, 1817
NE 114

14 Sketches for “Hammerklavier” Sonata, a choral symphony and a fugue
1817/18
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB BSk 8/56

Many projects from Beethoven’s sketchbooks petered out and never took shape. Among them are numerous fugues conceived during the course of his life. We would probably have liked to hear the fugue for string quintet with slow introduction, whose thematic framework Beethoven sketched on the sheet fragment from 1817 (13). Beethoven worked for a longer time on this fugue and completed at least the first 50 bars in another manuscript. It was intended as a contribution to a complete edition of his works by Haslinger that never materialised, but instead was cancelled. The fugue on a sketch leaf for the Hammerklavier Sonata (14) unfortunately did not get that far. We do not even know for which instrument Beethoven intended it.

SHOWCASE 6

15 Pocket sketchbook for Missa solemnis op. 123 with sketches for Credo (on display the fugue “Et vitam venturi”) and Agnus Dei
1820
BH 108

On the other hand, other works were completed, in part with a very great expenditure of time. Beethoven spent many months carving the fugues of the Missa solemnis, which would become one of his most extensive works and was to come as close to perfection as possible. On the open page of the pocket sketchbook, Beethoven worked out the theme to the fugue “Et vitam venturi” in the Credo. Traditionally, the closing words of the Credo are set as a fugue. Beethoven’s realisation is not only one of the highlights of his Mass, but probably also one of the most difficult Credo fugues in the entire Mass literature. In his sketches, one can understand the amount of work involved, because finding a theme alone – a theme must be suitable for all developmental possibilities – takes up long stretches of the sketches.

Abhandlung von der Fuge

nach den Grundsätzen und Exempeln der besten deutschen und ausländischen Meister

entworfen von

Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg.

1. Theil

Nebst LXII. Kupfertafeln.

Berlin, bey A. Haude, und J. C. Spener, Königl. und der Academie der Wissenschaften Buchhändler. 1753.

Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, Abhandlung von der Fuge, Haude und Spener, Berlin, 1753/54

BEETHOVEN'S COPIES FROM TEXTBOOKS ON FUGUE COMPOSITION

SHOWCASE 7

16 Letter to Franz Anton Hoffmeister in Leipzig, Vienna, 15 January 1801
NE 160

17 Letter to Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig, Vienna, 26 July 1809
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Br 78

18 Excerpts by Beethoven from: Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, Abhandlung von der Fuge (opened: copy of excerpts from the Fugue in C minor BWV 871 from J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier II)
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB BSk 5/53

19 Excerpts by Beethoven from: Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, Gründliche Anweisung zur Composition (opened: copy of excerpts from the Fugues in D minor BWV 875 and E major BWV 878 from J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier II)
1809–1815
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 46d

20 Beethoven's copy of two inventions for piano by J. S. Bach (three-part Symphony No. 3 in D major BWV 789 and two-part Invention No. 11 in G minor BWV 782)
around 1817
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 43

"Not Bach [stream], but Meer [ocean] should his name be" – Beethoven may never have uttered this most famous characterization of Bach. It is one of the many apocryphal statements by Beethoven, i.e. not backed up by documents, that can be found in large numbers today, especially on the internet. Even if the saying is not by Beethoven, it is well invented and corresponds to his attitude, for Beethoven's veneration of Bach is documented in many places. In 1801, his friend, the publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister in Leipzig, planned a complete edition of Bach's works. Enthusiastic about this project, Beethoven wrote to him in January 1801 (16): "that you want to publish Sebastian Bach's works is something that does my heart, which beats completely for the high, great art of this forefather of harmony, a great deal of good". In July 1809, he wrote to his publisher Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig, who also had Bach in their programme (17): "I had started a few times to give a small weekly meeting for vocal music at my home [...] for this purpose and in general I would appreciate it if you would give me most of the scores you have, such as Mozart's requiem etc. Haidn's masses. In general, all of the scores by Haidn, Mozart, Bach, Johann Sebastian Bach, emanuel etc one after the other". So Beethoven simply ordered the whole programme,

and not only father Johann Sebastian, but also son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. A good year later, he also ordered the B minor Mass from Breitkopf & Härtel. In addition, he had heard that Breitkopf & Härtel possessed the "best copy" of the Well-Tempered Clavier, i.e. a flawless copy of the cycle that was mostly distributed in manuscript form, and he ordered a copy of this as well. The Well-Tempered Clavier was regarded then less as pure performance music than it is today, but rather as a textbook that provided model fugue repertoire for study. Beethoven had already studied the compendium as a boy in Bonn, an important educational step that his teacher Christian Gottlob Neefe reported on in a "Nachricht von der churfürstlich-cöllnischen Hofcapelle zu Bonn und andern Tonkünstler daselbst" in 1783. Many music theory textbooks also used Bach's fugues as examples for certain problem areas. This was one of many ways in which the Well-Tempered Clavier was received around 1800. In his two-volume standard work "Abhandlung von der Fuge", Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg used Bach's Fugue in C minor BWV 871 from the Well-Tempered Clavier II to illustrate how a fugue movement is constructed in its components. Beethoven made himself a copy of this passage (18). Perhaps the theorists were an easy way for him to see the second part of the Well-Tempered Clavier. In his textbook "Gründliche Anweisung zur Composition", Johann Georg Albrechtsberger explained rules for three-part and polyphonic fugues on the basis of Bach's works. Here, Beethoven became acquainted with the excerpts from the Fugue in D minor BWV 875 bar 15 with upbeat and bars 26–27, and from the Fugue in E major BWV 878 bars 23-27 from the second volume (19). Copying was an important form of appropriation and study for Beethoven, which is why he also made complete copies, for example around 1817 of two inventions by Johann Sebastian Bach, the three-part Symphony No. 3 in D major BWV 789 and the two-part Invention No. 11 in G minor BWV 782 (20).

SHOWCASE 8

21 Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, Gründliche Anweisung zur Composition
Breitkopf, Leipzig, 1790
BB 16 ALBR / 1790

22 Counterpoint studies, excerpts from Albrechtsberger's textbook
1794
BH 102

23 Prelude to a fugue for string quartet
1794/95
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 62

24 Sketch for a double fugue in F major for four-part mixed choir
1794/95
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 61

Ludwig van Beethoven was already introduced to counterpoint and music theory as a youth during his education in Bonn. Even then, every professional musician had to be familiar with fugue theory. In Vienna in 1794/95, Beethoven completed another full course of training in counterpoint with Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, who was the city's most famous teacher of composition at the time. In 1790, Albrechtsberger had published a widely read book (21), "Gründliche Anweisung zur Composition; mit deutlichen und ausführlichen Exempeln, zum Selbstunterrichte, erläutert; und mit einem Anhange: Von der Beschaffenheit und Anwendung aller jetzt üblichen musikalischen Instrumente" (Leipzig 1790). Beethoven even gave away a copy in 1817 and considered this theory of composition to be the most important one, which he also recommended to his pupils. Albrechtsberger did not use his book in lessons, but rather thought up new examples, adapted to the respective pupil. That Beethoven nevertheless used the book is shown by this copy from the 25th chapter "Regeln zu den drey- und mehrstimmigen Fugen" from 1794 (22). Albrechtsberger's teaching was very structured. In each teaching unit, Beethoven first learned the rules, which he then had to apply to concrete examples. At the end of a lesson, there was always a movement for string instruments, which, like the model J. S. Bach, was usually divided into a prelude and a fugue. When Beethoven delivered his test piece, it was corrected by the teacher and then neatly copied again by himself, like this prelude for string quartet in D minor, which is only preserved as a fragment (23). For Albrechtsberger, the fugue was "the most necessary genre of church music". In his lessons, Beethoven therefore had to write church music fugues. Although he did not finish the Kyrie fugue (24), it is clear that he learned to first notate the framework of subject and counter subject, which would only be filled in later.

SHOWCASE 9

25 Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, Abhandlung von der Fuge
Haude und Spener, Berlin, 1753/54
BB 16 MARP / 1753

26 Excerpts from Marpurg's textbook (also contains text excerpts from Albrechtsberger and Johann Joseph Fux's Gradus ad Parnassum)
1809–1815
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 46a

27 Excerpts from Marpurg's textbook on fugue theory
(also contains excerpts from Albrechtsberger)
1809–1815
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 46i

28 Johann Philipp Kirnberger, Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik
Decker, Berlin, 1774–1779
BB 16 KIRN / 1774

29 Excerpt from Kirnberger's textbook
1809–1815
Collection H. C. Bodmer, HCB Mh 46g

For Beethoven, however, fugue theory was obviously much more than just a tiresome section of his education. In the course of his life, he copied many hundreds of pages from standard works on music theory for study. For him, copying was a form of appropriation; by writing, he internalised the facts. It was completely irrelevant that he had the books at home or that he had already copied the same passage several times. He examined the rules again and again – out of fascination, out of curiosity, as an intellectual pastime or as brain jogging. Besides Albrechtsberger, the great two-volume standard work on fugue theory was Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg's "Abhandlung von der Fuge" (25). Marpurg thus summarised the state of the art of fugue, so to speak, and set a standard that is still valid today for subsequent generations (Anton Bruckner still studied fugue according to Marpurg). Beethoven also appropriated essential contents of the textbook, e.g. how to construct the counter subject correctly (in Marpurg: "Von der Einrichtung des Gefährten", 26) or basic rules for constructing a polyphonic fugue (Marpurg: "Allgemeine Regeln zum Verfolg einer zwey- drey- oder vierstimmigen einfachen Fuge", 27). One of the trickiest forms of composition in the fugue is double counterpoint, in which the subject and counter subject can be interchanged in their position without creating faulty intervals. Many tens of pages of Beethoven's copies bear witness to his enthusiasm for this complex form, for which he gathered

information from all the textbooks of his time. He also made notes on double counterpoint (29) from Johann Philipp Kirnberger's "Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik" (28). As in all textbooks, there are control numbers to check the correct interval spacing.

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AUDIO SAMPLES

All audio samples are taken from:
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