The Composer's Composer

Module 6 of Music: Under the Hood

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Outline

- · Biography of J. S. Bach
- Joy and celebration: Brandenburg 3
- Misconceptions about Bach's music
- Analysis of *C-sharp Minor Fugue* (WTC)
- Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

Biography

- Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750
 - Part of large musical family
 - Children were surrounded by music.
 - Orphan at age 10, lived with older brother.
 - · Choirboy, but a musical prodigy.
 - Why did he become the most famous?
 - "I have had to work hard. Anyone who works just as hard will get just as far."

Biography

- Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750
 - Details of his life are sketchy.
 - He would have it this way. The music was not about him.
 - Wrote "INJ" (In Nomine Jesu) on many of his scores, including secular music.
 - Difficult relations with employers
 - Complained of too much work and too little pay.



Bach at age 30

Biography

- Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750
 - Married twice
 - 7 children with cousin Maria Barbara
 - 13 children with Anna Magdalena, met at Köthen
 - Half of his children died before adulthood







Biography

- Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750
 - Liked to have a good time
 - Sang barroom songs with friends on Sundays after church
 - Devoted to family
 - Became blind in old age
 - · But kept working.
 - May have been diabetic.



Bach with 3 of his sons

Biography

- Career
 - Court musician at age 18, Weimar.
 - Choir director & organist at 3 churches, age 20-23
 - Expected to write cantatas for church services
 - · Bad relations with employers
 - Court organist at Weimar, age 23
 - Wrote Toccata and Fugue in D minor



Bach's house in Weimar

Biography

- Career
 - Court musician at Köthen, age 32
 - · Got along well with Prince Leopold
 - Wrote Brandenburg Concertos for Duke of Brandenburg
 - Wrote Well-Tempered Clavier



Schloß Köthen

Biography

- Career
 - Church organist and choir director in Leipzig, age 38
 - Wrote a cantata every week
 - Wrote St Matthew Passion and other passions
 - Wrote part of Mass in B Minor at age 48, finished at age 64
 - Wrote Art of the Fugue (unfinished) shortly before his death, age 65.





Biography

- · Musical achievement
 - Primary musical task of Baroque era: make abstract music intelligible
 - Bach indulged in some numerology to do this.
 - This didn't work.
 - · His main contribution is highly-structured counterpoint.



Biography

- · What is counterpoint?
 - Counterpoint consists of several independent musical voices that interact in harmony.
 - For example, <u>Dixieland music</u>.
 - A metaphor for Western culture.
 - We are individualists but coexist by following the rules.
 - Bach became all-time master of counterpoint.
 - Reflects Enlightenment view that order underlies the complexity of the universe.



Misconceptions

- Think Bach is always serious? Try these:
 - Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major
 - YouTube performance at Schloß Köthen, where it was composed and first performed (with Bach playing viola)!
 - Check out 3rd movement, 5:52
 - Coffee Cantata
 - Father upset because daughter wants to "drink coffee" with her boyfriend.
 - Coffee = "The Devil's drink"
 - Check out scene at 3:25



Misconceptions

- Think Bach isn't emotional? Try these:
 - Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor, for solo violin
 One of the great monuments of Western civilization
 - <u>Mass in B minor</u>
 - Likewise.



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Misconceptions

- Think Bach organ fugues are boring? Try this:
 - "Gigue" Fugue in G major for organ



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C-sharp minor Fugue

- Well-tempered Clavier
 - Perhaps greatest music book ever.
 - Unparalleled collection of 48 preludes and fugues
 - Incidentally, demonstrates tempered tuning (but not
 - equal temperament).Preludes & fugues use all 24 major & minor keys.



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C-sharp minor Fugue

- · C-sharp minor fugue
 - From Book 1 of WTC.
 - A complex fugue for 5 voices
 - Somber mood.
 - Shows that even the most highly cerebral music can be highly emotional.
 - This is the essence of Western music.

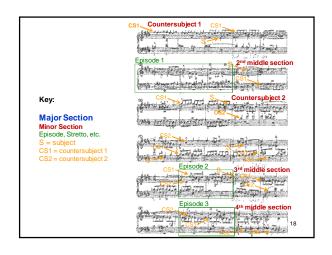
Bach's manuscript

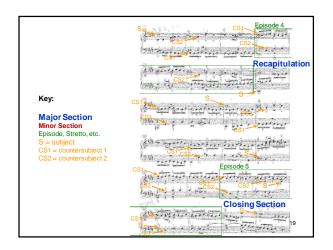
Audio file — with graphics

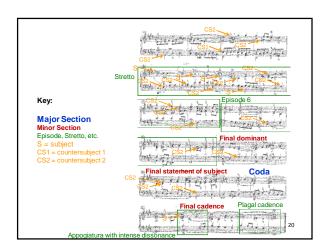
Audio file — Hélène Grimaud (3:12)

Key:

Major Section
Minor Section
Episode, Stretto, etc.
S = subject
CS1 = countersubject 1
CS2 = countersubject 2







Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- Bach's organ music lifts us out of the muck of everyday existence.
 - To a higher state of mind.
 - This requires horsepower, both from the instrument and the composer.



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Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- · Should music be loud?
 - In this case, yes!
 - The power of the music supports the power of the instrument.



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Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- Example: Joy and celebration
 - Toccata, from Toccata and Fugue in F major.
 - Interweaving voices over pedal point, tonic key (F major)
 - Multiple suspensions 1:00
 - Pedal solo, modulates to dominant key (C major) 1:20
 - Opening material in dominant 1:52
 - Pedal solo in dominant key, modulates to G major 2:50
 - Episode w/ cascading counterpoint, cycles through keys 3:33
 - Episode, increasing complexity 4:06
 - Episode with cascading counterpoint 4:45
 - Deceptive cadence 6:20
 - Closing section with powerful descending pedal 7:17
 - Coda over C major pedal point, final cadence 7:48

Beam me up, Johann Sebastian

- Example: An epic journey
 - Fugue, from "Dorian" Toccata and Fugue in D minor
 - The subject seems to reach for something higher, but slides back.
 - Metaphor for human struggle through history?
 - All hell breaks loose in the closing section. Armageddon?



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