

## 9 – Fugue Subjects & Answers

Fugues are considered the pinnacle of contrapuntal sophistication. The form has a long history reaching back to the Renaissance and it was one of the dominant forms of the Baroque era. Although fugues fell out of favor during the Classical period some Romantic composers, most notably Beethoven and Brahms, resurrected the form in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fugues have even survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably in the music of Paul Hindemith, but also in significant works by Bela Bartok and Igor Stravinsky. Nonetheless, it was the Baroque era in which the fugue had its heyday.

In a subsequent chapter the structure of fugues as a whole will be considered in greater detail, this chapter will focus solely on the topic of fugue subjects and answers. The *subject* of a fugue is the primary theme of the entire fugue. In a Baroque fugue this is crucial because one of the most impressive aspects of fugal composition is that all of the melodic material heard in the entire fugue is derived from the subject. Perhaps the most rewarding way to analyze a fugue is to trace the manner in which small gestures present in a fugue subject are expanded upon later in the course of the fugue.

Fugue subjects are of different lengths although the following examples are typical of most subjects. Some however run to eight measures long. Also, fugue subjects are different from many tunes we may know in that they are not *periodic* in structure. That is to say that they don't come in neat 2 or 4 bars phrase lengths.

One of the most significant collections of fugues was composed by J.S. Bach and is known as the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The “WTC” is a collection of 24 Preludes and Fugues in all 12 major and minor keys. Bach in fact composed two volumes of fugues and preludes which are known as the *WTC Book I* and the *WTC Book II*.

Ex. 9-1a Bach: Fugue 1 in C Major from WTC Book I

Subject -----  
Answer -----

Ex. 9-1b Bach: Fugue 4 in C# minor from WTC Book I

Subject -----  
Answer -----

Ex. 9-1c Bach: Fugue 12 in F minor from WTC Book I

Subject -----  
Answer -----

Example 9-1a is the subject of the first fugue in C Major from the *WTC Book I*. The structure of the WTC is arranged so that the first Prelude and Fugue is in C Major, the second in C minor, the third in C# Major and so forth up to the 24<sup>th</sup> fugue which is in B minor. All of the odd numbered preludes and fugues are in major keys, and the even numbered fugues are in minor keys. It can be seen from the examples in 9-1 that fugue subjects virtually always begin on either the tonic or dominant scale degrees. They also usually end on a strong beat on the root, third or fifth of the tonic chord.

The right hand side of each of these examples is what is called the *answer* to each of these subjects. Most fugues begin with a single voice stating the subject. The second voice to enter restates the subject, but in the dominant region instead of the tonic. This is called the *answer*. Of course the first voice continues while the answer is being played, but the continuation is omitted in these examples for the sake of clarity. Being able to compose the ‘correct’ answer to a fugue subject is not as easy as it may seem and will be taken up next.

The answer shown in Ex. 9-1a is straightforward. This is an example of a *real* answer. A *real* answer is one in which each note of the answer is a perfect fifth above (or perfect fourth below) the corresponding note of the subject. When notating answers it is important to bear in mind that the key signature suits the subject better than it does the answer. The result is that some notes in the answer may require accidentals even though the corresponding note in the subject didn’t have an accidental. This can be seen in ex. 9-1b. The second scale degree in a minor key is an easy note to overlook, in this example the penultimate note of the answer requires an A# to be a perfect fifth above the penultimate note of the subject. Of course the second note also has to be adjusted by the use of the double-sharp. One other point about notating answers to fugue subjects is that if the subject is in a minor key then the answer is in the minor dominant, not the major dominant.

Ex. 9-1c is a highly chromatic subject in the key of F minor. The answer must likewise apply accidentals to maintain the perfect fifth interval, but again notice that the penultimate note (scale degree 2 in minor) requires an accidental in the answer that wasn’t present at that point in the subject. In major key subjects the leading tone presents the same problem as scale degree 2 in minor and is an easy adjustment to forget when notating an answer.

Ex. 9-1c has one other variance from the subject that requires further explanation. This subject begins not with the tonic note, but the dominant (5<sup>th</sup> scale degree) and for this reason the corresponding note in the answer must be dropped a whole step, as it is in ex. 9-1c. When an answer is altered in this manner it is called a *tonal* answer. *A tonal answer is required whenever a fugue subject has the fifth scale degree at or near the beginning.* This may seem arbitrary, but since the answer in a fugue begins immediately following the subject they must link together in a seamless manner. Looking again at ex. 9-1c, if the first note of the answer had been a ‘G’ (as it would have been in a real answer) instead of the tonally adjusted ‘F’ the ‘G’ would have been a dissonance relative to the F minor harmony at the conclusion of the subject.

Ex. 9-2 Bach: Fugue 2 in C minor from WTC Book II

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb) and a common time signature (C). The subject is a descending eighth-note scale starting on G4 (the fifth line of the staff) and ending on C4 (the first line). The answer is an ascending eighth-note scale starting on F4 (the first space) and ending on Bb4 (the second space). The subject is labeled 'Subject' with a dashed line underneath, and the answer is labeled 'Answer' with a dashed line above it.

Example 9-2 is from another fugue that starts on the fifth scale degree. For this reason the first note of the answer is adjusted down a whole step from the ‘D’ it would have been if it were a real answer. The ‘D’ of real answer would have created a major 7<sup>th</sup> relative to the Eb in the lower part. Notice however that the fourth note of the subject is also the fifth scale degree, but the fourth note of the answer is not lowered, only the first. This is common in tonal answers, and depends upon the specific features of the subject. In general the fewer notes that are changed to adjust an answer the better.

Ex. 9-3 Buxtehude: Fugue in F

The image shows a single staff of music in F major. The first measure is the subject, consisting of four quarter notes: C4, C4, C4, C4. The second measure continues with D4, E4, F4, G4. The third measure is the answer, starting with E4, F4, G4, A4. The first note of the answer (E4) is lower than the first note of the subject (C4). Dashed lines indicate the extent of the subject and answer.

Example 9-3 is an exception to this principle. In this case the four C’s that are heard in the first measure of the subject are a vital feature of the subject, so in the answer it would have been odd and unmusical to change only the first note of bar 3 rather than lowering all four notes as Buxtehude chose to do. This revision does change the interval between the fifth and sixth notes of the answer to a 3<sup>rd</sup> instead of the 2<sup>nd</sup> that it was in the subject. This alteration however is not especially noticeable and doesn’t obscure the relationship of the answer to the subject.

There is one other type of fugue subject which requires a tonal answer. *If a subject modulates to the dominant at the end then it will require a tonal answer.* In this situation however the adjustments are made at the end of the answer, not the beginning. Ex. 9-4 is an example of this type of subject and answer.

Ex. 9-4 Corelli: Sonata op. 1, No. 2, Allegro

The image shows two staves of music in E minor. The first staff contains the subject and the beginning of the answer. The subject starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5. The answer begins with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes F#5, G5, A5, B5. A bracket labeled 'P5 up' spans the interval between the end of the subject (E5) and the start of the answer (F#5). The second staff shows the continuation of the answer: quarter notes C6, B5, A5, G5, F#5, E5. A bracket labeled 'P4 up' spans the interval between the end of the answer (E5) and the start of the next measure (F#5). Dashed lines indicate the extent of the subject and answer.

If a fugue subject modulates it will inevitably modulate to the dominant. The raised 4<sup>th</sup> scale degree will occur before the end of the subject and the subject will end on the dominant scale degree. In example 9-4 the note A# near the end signals the modulation from E minor to B minor. A real answer won’t do in these cases because a real answer would modulate to the key of F# minor, which is not a closely related key to E minor, and is therefore unacceptable. So, in cases like this the end of the answer is altered to permit the subject to modulate back to the original key from the minor dominant. This involves lowering the last few notes of the answer a

whole step and should always include the note that corresponded to the raised 4<sup>th</sup> scale degree in the subject. Most often it will include one or more notes prior to the raised 4<sup>th</sup> scale degree as well, to make the adjustment more subtle. In ex. 9-4 the last three notes of the answer have been lowered a whole step from what they would have been in a real answer. This is a good place to make this alteration since it is a leap and disguises the alteration rather well.

It should also be noted that the subject in Ex.9-4 begins with scale degree 5. In Corelli's answer the first note is left unchanged and he only adjusted the answer at the end. The reason for this is that as the subject modulated to B minor the 5<sup>th</sup> scale degree at the start of the answer is not dissonant. In fact, had it been lowered it would be dissonant. When notating an answer to a subject the first question to be answered is, "does the subject modulate to the dominant?" If so, then any issue concerning the 5<sup>th</sup> scale degree at or near the beginning is a moot point.

Often fugue subjects will have a *link* following the note that sounds like the last note of the subject. The purpose of the link is to modulate to the dominant to prepare for the answer and to keep the rhythmic intensity at a high level. The fugue in Ex. 9-5 has a very long subject which features the 5<sup>th</sup> scale degree near the beginning. However, since the *link* modulates to D minor the answer is real.

Ex. 9-5 Bach: "Little G minor Fugue"

### Summary

- The *subject* of a fugue is the first voice to enter, usually by itself and which provides most of the melodic figures to be heard throughout the fugue.
- The *answer* in a fugue is the restatement of the subject at the dominant level in the second voice to enter.
- A *real answer* is one in which every note of the answer is a perfect fifth above (or a perfect fourth below) the corresponding note of the subject. (Remember to raise chromatically any notes in the answer that corresponded to the leading tone in a major key, or any notes that corresponded to the supertonic (2<sup>nd</sup>) in the subject in a minor key.)
- A *tonal answer* will be called for if the subject modulates to the key of the dominant at the end of the subject. In this case the notes leading to and following the raised 4<sup>th</sup> scale degree in the subject should be lowered a whole step from what they would have been in a real answer.
- A *tonal answer* will also be called for if the subject has the fifth scale degree as the first note, or within the first 3 or 4 notes. In this case the note(s) in a real answer which corresponded to the fifth scale degree should be lowered a whole step.