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Bach: Art of Fugue

With the Art of Fugue, a veritable Bible of fugal techniques and expression, Bach produced a monumental edifice. (The idea of fugue, for the uninitiated, is that of a musical form which deals with a number of voices all discoursing on shared thematic material, a “subject,” in much the same way debates focus on a subject.) A compilation of fugues based on a single subject (and its variations), the Art of Fugue seems to be an exhaustive study of the possibilities of the form, a composer testing his mettle, expanding his horizons. It has long been debated whether the work is in fact a study, theoretical or conceptual, never meant to be performed. Were it meant to be performed there is much speculation on what instrumentation was intended; is it a keyboard work, a work for a consort of like instruments, for a broken consort, a vocal group? The piece is written in “open score” – on four staves, one per part, with no other indications. There is much room for discussion, for scholarly musings and musicological excavation. What is clear to us is that this is a golden treasure trove of riveting musical rhetoric, elevated, intricately woven round- table discussions which make for an engaging concert experience. It is music for which we have a deep love and which we feel we can bring to life effectively through the medium of the string quartet.

Note by Mark Steinberg