Bach’s last demonstration of contrapuntal mastery was *The Art of Fugue*, a collection of fourteen fugues and four canons that systematically explores all the wizardry of fugal devices. Scholars have argued over the intent of this highly technical work: was it meant as a theoretical exercise or for performance? And if performed, by what instruments? Because of the intricacies of the lines, the four voices are written on separate staves rather than in keyboard notation (on two staves); this has prompted widely diversified recordings by orchestras, chamber ensembles and even brass groups—among them the well-known Canadian Brass. The collection is generally accepted today as keyboard music, probably meant for organ or harpsichord.

**BACH’S CONTRAPUNCTUS I, FROM THE ART OF FUGUE**

We will consider the opening fugue, called Contrapunctus I. Its four voices introduce the subject successively in the order alto-soprano-bass-tenor. This constitutes the *exposition*. (The soprano and tenor have the answer form of the subject, set in the key of the dominant; see Listening Guide 28.) At this point, the first *episode* distracts our attention from the subject, and for the extended middle section of the fugue, we wait with anticipation for other statements of the now-familiar tune that alternate with episodes. Bach tricks the ear with several false entries that anticipate a full statement of the theme, and in one case, he overlaps the subjects, beginning one before the previous statement is completed (in *stretto*). The tonic (D minor) is reestablished by a bold statement in the bass, heard on the organ pedals, and we feel solidly in the home key with the sustained pedal note on D. The final chord—a major triad—jolts us from the contemplative minor-key setting.

Although this fugue does not exploit all the compositional devices described, nor does it even have a real countersubject that recurs, Bach increases the complexity of the counterpoint with each fugue in this collection, trying his hand at using multiple subjects, mirror techniques, and even symbolism (he incorporates his name as a countersubject—B♭-A-C-H; in German, the letter H refers to the pitch B natural). There is no question this collection was the climax of Bach’s keyboard art.
EXPOSITION

4 entries of subject (answer) in alternation:
  alto (subject)
  soprano (answer)
  bass (subject)
  tenor (answer)
Episode 3—end exposition (6 measures).

MIDDLE ENTRIES

Subject stated 2 times:
  alto
  soprano (transposed to A)
Answer in bass (overlaps soprano in stretto).
Episode 2 (4 measures).
Answer in tenor.
Episode 3 (5 measures).
Answer heard, anticipated in alto, then full statement in soprano.

CLOSING SECTION

Subject in bass (but anticipated in soprano).
Episode 4.
Pedal point in bass.
Rhetorical pauses.
Answer—final statement over sustained pedal on tonic.
Ends with major chord.