

Jon Gillock

9, rue La Pierre Fitte • 91800 Boussy-Saint Antoine, FRANCE

TELEPHONE: +33 (0)1.69.00.49.62

E-MAIL: jon.gillock@aliceadsl.fr

www.jongillock.com

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PRESS RELEASE

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Leslie Martin (206-522-7144; lmartin415@gmail.com)

Jon Gillock (see above)

Performances across the US of Bach's *Art of Fugue* to honor John Cowell (1920-2007)

This October organists Jon Gillock and Dean Kauffman, classmates at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, will again join forces, this time in Celebration and Homage to the Life and Heritage of their esteemed teacher and mentor John Cowell. Seven concerts in all, the tour will take them from New Hampshire, to Norwalk, CT, Schenectady, NY, Pittsburgh, PA, Seattle, WA, and Fayetteville, AR.

The concert in Seattle will be held on Wednesday, October 28, 7 pm, at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. On Tuesday, the day before, Gillock will also present a masterclass for Seattle Pacific University and the University of Washington at St. Stephen's.

Gillock (internationally known especially for his interpretations of Messiaen) and Kauffman, Cowell's first organ students at the University of Arkansas, will perform J. S. Bach's epic masterpiece *Die Kunst der Fuge* (The Art of Fugue) in rarely heard live performances of this renowned work. In fact, it is perhaps better known by its reputation than by its transcendent beauty because Bach left no indications — in this, his last work, which is incomplete — as to its instrumentation. Thus, for many years musicians and theorists have considered it a purely academic work in demonstrating the ultimate in the handling of the art of the most complicated fugal techniques: from simple fugues and canons to double, triple, and quadruple fugues in mirror and inversion. Thus, a work not to be performed.

However, after playing only the first few measures of the first fugue, one begins to realize the touching beauty of this music and its majestic, imposing quality, regardless of the fact that Bach left no performance indications.

The work has been recorded several times on the organ, by string quartet and various other mediums but is rarely performed in public. However, none of these instrumentations seem to be able to capture the overwhelming spiritual beauty this marvelous work contains.

These two performers will present the piece as a work for piano/4-hands (sometimes on one piano, other times on two) as arranged by Bruno Seidlhofer for the *Neue Bachgesellschaft* in 1937. To purist this may seem strange being that the piano did not exist during the time of Bach. But, to these performers this seems like an ideal medium for purely musical reasons.

While the fugues are never written in more than four-voices (notated in open score of four staves), the organ seems like an obvious choice considering the many marvelous four-part fugues Bach wrote for that instrument. However, because the musical themes used here simply do not fit naturally on the keyboard and become very clumsy for the feet (especially in the tempos of the exciting fugues) they feel it is unlikely that it was intended for this instrument alone.

The shape of these fugues subjects and counter-subjects fit much more organically in the hands of string players. While a string quartet can give appropriate tempos without any trouble, they often lack the dynamic differences called for between the very intimate fugues (no problem there) and the dramatic and more powerful ones — and all the nuances between the two ends of the tonal spectrum.

While admittedly probably a romantic concept of the piece, Gillock & Kauffman love to perform the work for four hands – and preferably at two pianos where the two hands in the middle do not get in the way of one another.

Even though not a baroque instrument, the piano (played by four hands) can give that effect if properly approached: unexaggerated tempos and dynamics, an endless palette of colors to fit each fugue (as in the organ), the endless possibility of just slightly bringing out a theme at the right moment (as a string quartet can so easily do). In addition, because of the expanded tonal range that four hands give, they can even produce an organ-like effect by doubling voices at one octave (sometimes even two, such as using 8', 4', and 2' stops in the organ) giving the work majesty and solemnity without the constraint of a too slow tempo that an organist would be hindered by. This is exactly how Seidlhofer's arrangement is conceived.

The *Art of Fugue* begins with four simple fugues and leads us through every possible combination of fugal writing imaginable: fugues in contrary motion, on several subjects treated in different manners (at the octave, in double counterpoint at the 10th, the 12th, and finally an inverted canon in augmentation). In the eleventh, climactic fugue, Bach introduces his own name (B-A-C-H) as one of the subjects. From this point the piece seems to begin again with four canonic 2-part fugues, three mirror fugues, finally arriving at a quadruple fugue in which all four subjects of the work were to be combined. Just at the point where the first theme of the work was to enter, Bach stopped...the work never to be finished. Then, after a long silence, Seidelhofer ends the work by adding a transcription of Bach's last chorale prelude for organ *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit* ("Before Thy throne, my God, I stand").

In many ways, this work by Bach can be compared to the music of Messiaen in its ability to transport the listener into another world — a heavenly world of peace and love.

Thus, Gillock & Kauffman chose this masterpiece with which to honor their mentor. All the qualities of John Cowell are perfectly demonstrated by this music: his dedication to the true meaning of music (not just its technical solutions) and how to find these qualities in the music itself, his devotion to and love of his students, and above all his fidelity and constant search for true music-making. Besides a master teacher, he was an exceptional concert pianist, composer, and conductor — and a special and fine human being.

This project has quite an unusual history. At first, this Celebration was imagined as a rather small undertaking, performing *The Art of Fugue* (mainly because Cowell had coached the duo on the masterpiece 40 years ago) only two times in the places where John Cowell had worked and lived: 1) in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where Gillock & Kauffman met and studied with him at the University, where he was Chairman of the Music Department, and 2) in the Seattle-Tacoma area where he had been organist and choirmaster in several well-known churches as well as the Dean of Music and faculty member of the Cornish Institute of Music in the early part of his career and where he returned to work and continue to make music until his death after retirement.

Starting the organization of these two proposed concerts over a year ago soon began to seem like an impossibility. Everyone contacted was interested in “Celebrating John Cowell”, but with the economic crisis just beginning no one seemed to want to commit any financial support to this undertaking. Amazingly, the endeavor took off last spring. Now, instead of the originally planned two concerts, the tour now consists of seven performances of this amazing music from coast to coast!