

FROM BULL TO BACH:  
IN SEARCH OF PRECEDENTS FOR THE  
“COMPLETE” VERSION OF THE  
CANON BY AUGMENTATION AND  
CONTRARY MOTION  
IN J. S. BACH’S *MUSICAL OFFERING*

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In a recent article in this journal, Thomas Op de Coul argued for a solution to the augmentation canon from the *Musical Offering* in which the *thema regium* and first canonic part are repeated in order to allow a complete presentation of the augmented melody in the second canonic part.<sup>1</sup> This differs from the published version of the canon in the *Neue Bach Ausgabe*, which gives one statement of the canonic melody and *thema regium* and half of the canonic melody in augmentation.<sup>2</sup> In support of his claim that Bach “consciously tried to achieve a complete augmentation,” Op de Coul cited versions of the complete canon published prior to the *NBA*, and he examined the canon’s internal structure, which he claimed was devised to allow for a full presentation of the canonic melody in augmentation. Op de Coul noted one contemporary theoretical source, Marpurg’s *Abhandlung von der Fuge*,<sup>3</sup> which deals with complete augmentation canons, but he did not attempt to trace other precedents by earlier composers or theorists.

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<sup>1</sup>“The Augmentation Canon in J. S. Bach’s *Musicalisches Opfer*,” *BACH* 37/1 (2006): 50–77.

<sup>2</sup>J. S. Bach, *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke* [*NBA*], VIII/1, ed. Christoph Wolff (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1974), 49, 71.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Abhandlung von der Fuge nach den Grundsätzen und Exempeln der besten deutschen und ausländischen Meister entworfen*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1753–54; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), 108–09.

Because scholars generally agree that Bach was fully steeped in the traditions of canonic counterpoint and dedicated to the pursuit of those traditions in the last decade or so of his life,<sup>4</sup> it should be possible to situate the canon by augmentation and contrary motion amongst contrapuntal traditions that were developed in the seventeenth century, and perhaps even earlier. The present article sets out to identify precedents for the complete version of Bach's canon as advanced by Op de Coul and considers the viability of this solution from the perspective offered by the historical evidence.

Before tracing historical precedents, we should clearly distinguish the different structural components of the complete version of Bach's canon. The history of canon is replete with all manner of technical artifice from imitation in regular motion to pieces that may employ contrary motion, retrograde motion, augmentation, diminution, or a combination of these.<sup>5</sup> Many pieces labeled "canon" also include free or non-canonic parts; these may share the rhythmic and melodic characteristics of the canonic lines or they may function as *cantus firmi*. The ornamented version of the *thema regium* in Bach's canon combines both of these aspects. Obviously, the difficult task of writing a canon by augmentation is made even more complex by the presence of a *cantus firmus* or other preexisting melody. A further difficulty of a complete augmentation canon is the requirement of repeating the *dux* so that its two statements work against the *cantus firmus* as well as against the occasional examples of various kinds of augmentation canons, given without unknown in the output of these composers.

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<sup>4</sup>For general accounts of Bach's position in the history of canon see David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Werner Braun, "Bachs Stellung im Kanonstreit," *Bach Interpretationen*, ed. Martin Geck (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969); Denis B. Collins, "Musical Terminology in the Canonic Works of Bach: An Historical Context," *BACH* 26/1–2 (1995): 91–101.

<sup>5</sup>Historical overviews of canon may be found in Imogene Horsley, *Fugue: History and Practice* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 6–37, and Peter Cahn, "Kanon," *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 4, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1998), 1678–1706.