

OPUS

CHRISTOS PAPADOPOULOS / OPERA BALLET VLAANDEREN

Chasing Bach's Fugue



Marina Srnka
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'OPUS' by Christos Papadopoulos is a very serious work of art. In close collaboration with composer Karnilios Selamsis and the OBV dancers, Papadopoulos undertakes a task that borders on the impossible: to dismantle Johann Sebastian Bach's 'The Art of Fugue, Contrapunctus I' into its most primal particles, spanning sound, rhythm, and movement. The original score lasts barely four minutes; here, it is stretched to its limits, paired with a choreography that stays true to its principles with near-rigorous fidelity. It might make you suffer, but it is worth the pain. When all elements finally coalesce, the result is overwhelming, but undeniably magnificent.

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'OPUS' is not an entirely new creation. First brought to life in 2017 for Dansnat Jönköping (SE), it now returns nearly a decade later through a process of rigorous transformation. Initially conceived for four dancers, there are now four groups of three, arriving one after another almost like waves. This is not only a change in number: it immediately introduces one of the crucial compositional principles of the work: just like the rhythms, tones and melodies are introduced sequentially, the dancers appear in *succession*, in which each trio corresponds to a subject, an instrument, and a structural layer. The most prominent feature of the fugue is, of course, the *counterpoint*, where distinct melodic trajectories are held together in an unresolved tension. Each voice retains its own trajectory, its own identity, while contributing to a larger, cohesive structure.

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The fugue demands rigorous logic, and that logic is present in every aspect of this performance: principles of repetition, inversion, and delay are transposed into a choreographic language that provides seemingly infinite variations on a simple theme. Each note, tremor, or change in the music is connected to concrete, elemental movements. The complexity of the score gives rise to an equivalent complexity in the dance. The dancers are visualising Bach in the most thorough way imaginable. In doing so, Bach becomes more mysterious than ever.

Embodied Counterpoint

The stage is bare, entirely white. A white cube, perhaps. Or an empty canvas. A single lightbulb hovers above the floor, still unlit. As the stage light imperceptibly dims, the bulb gradually comes to life. Three dancers enter: black shirts, black trousers, formal shoes. One might be tempted to call this minimalist. In this exposition, the fugue's four subjects are reduced to distinct rhythms at a single pitch, articulated through four instrumental voices. Four groups of three dancers each inhabit a tonal layer, and they explore their own paths through shifting rhythmic patterns. Like puppets, the bodies are dragged by the invisible forces of the rhythms in this way or that, every beat marked by an abrupt change in direction. Crucially, the movements are fully led by the upper body: the shoulders turn, the head drops or rises, the arms swirl, but the feet remain still. The dancers shuffle and glide along the floor, without performing a single defined step.

After the individual fragmentation of the first part, the second introduces a surprising sense of unity. The dancers now form a single collective that follows a slow rendering of the full melodic line: high-pitched, insistent tones stretched to sixteen minutes. Here it becomes apparent: every single tone is coupled with a specific movement. The theme is stripped to its core, revealed in its basic components. A curious approach to a fugue. The experience is intense, at times, frankly, unbearable (some audience members around me cover their ears). The persistence of the sound, its sharpness, its refusal to resolve - it presses against the limits of attention. And yet this tension feels intentional, as though the work were testing not only the structure of the fugue, but also the endurance of the listener.

Visible music

Then individual differences re-emerge, the voices diverge, and the full fugue is revealed. Ultimately, this is the climax: the fugue as we know it from Bach. Gradually, everything clicks; the dancers return to their respective instrument and movement groups. It is as though the scales fall from our eyes, and the music becomes *visible* – crystal clear, and brimming with an almost spiritual emotion and intensity.

That Papadopoulos chooses to take on Bach is revealing. For artists and listeners alike, the fugue remains perhaps the most daunting of genres. Often treated less as performance material than as a discipline of study, a proving ground for skill, it is the extreme expression of fanatical commitment to an idea of uncompromising mathematical order and musical logic pushed to its limits. Bach's 'The Art of Fugue' effectively sealed the genre's fate. Why, indeed, would anyone attempt to explore these complex musical riddles, if one cannot hope to rival such mastery?

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moves so precisely on its own?

‘OPUS’, however, trusts that its artistry can hold its own. It (indirectly) provokes a different question. Why put choreography and music together - why *body as instrument* when the fugue already moves so precisely on its own? The answer may lie in the word itself: a *fuga* is a flight, a pursuit, a chase. The fugue is never still; it is *movement*. In this sense, it is already choreographic: an organisation of motion displaced into sound (rather than space). Yet here, even if the performers’ bodies seem at times like obedient echoes, there is something more going on. The body enters in a dense and intricate corporeal interplay - with the instrument, with the score, with the vibrating matter of sound itself, with the acoustics of the space, and with the presence of other bodies. In short, Bach has never felt so visceral.