

How To Learn Any Fugue in 5 Easy Steps

by Chris Foley

Part of the wonder and frustration of playing fugues lies in the sheer complexity of playing with only two hands a contrapuntal composition that most of the time contains at least 3 moving voices. We need to line up each moment of the composition, divide the voices between our two hands (often with bizarre fingerings) and at the same time hear the melodic direction of every one of the voices, which are most of the time doing completely independent things.

This mental and musical multitasking can be a sizable mountain to climb for younger pianists making their first acquaintance with the form, so it's important to have a clear order of battle when learning one of these beasts, whether for the first time or the forty-eighth.

Here's how I learn a fugue and how I teach others to learn one:

- 1. Play through the entire fugue at the first sitting.** That's right. Dig right in and get the darned thing learned, mistakes and all. Write in some fingerings if you need to, figure out which hand is playing what, and get to the end in one session. It usually takes an hour or so, and if you end up crawling away from the piano afterwards to cry into a plate of chocolate chip cookies or play World of Warcraft for the rest of the evening, that's okay.
- 2. Spend more time learning fingerings, articulations, division of the hands, and getting fluent.** Working at the entire texture, get the nuts and bolts of the piece worked out so that you can play it tolerably well.
- 3. Learn each voice individually.** You don't need to play with either the same fingerings or even the same hand that you played with in step 2. You just need to be able to hear the voice, its musical shape, where the phrase is going, and how you want to play it. Do this for every single voice in the fugue. Think of it like individual members of a choir going home and learning their parts before the next rehearsal.
- 4. Learn each combination of voices.** Once you've learned the individual voices, it's time to put them together in every possible subset of voices. Yes, every single one. That means for a 3-voice fugue (with soprano, alto, and bass parts) you'll play SA, SB, and TB. For a 4-voice fugue (with soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts) you'll play SA, ST, SB, AT, AB, TB, SAT, SAB, and ATB. For 5-voice fugues it gets even more complex, but do every single combination and you'll really know what you're doing.
- 5. Put the entire fugue together again.** Now is where it helps to have done some accurate work in step 2. However, when you put all the voices back again, the experience of having spent time learning the voices individually and in combination will completely change the experience of playing the fugue, as well as what you're able to comprehend. By now, you should have a sense of whether this is a stretto or episodic fugue (or combination thereof), as well as how each voice has its own character in relation to the others. After step 5, you'll be ready to do even more technical, musical, or analytical work with your interpretation thus far. Or you can go back to step 3 again and practice the individual lines again. At any rate, you will have already done the toughest work regarding how to wrap your fingers and brain around what can be some of the most wonderful, complex, frustrating, and glorious music in the repertoire.

About Chris Foley

Chris Foley is a pianist, teacher, examiner, adjudicator, and blogger based in Oakville, Ontario. He currently teaches at the Royal Conservatory of Music where he also serves as head of the voice department at the Conservatory School. As a member of Toronto's Tapestry New Works Studio Company, he has coached and performed in numerous workshops and performances of contemporary opera. In 2005, he started the Collaborative Piano Blog, which has grown to become one of the most well-known blogs about classical music. He has also made numerous media appearances, including playing piano for the first two seasons of Bathroom Divas (a reality show about opera singers), an interview about teaching piano to adult beginners on CBC Television's Living in Toronto, an interview in the Toronto Star about video games and music education, and an upcoming commercial for RCM Examinations.