

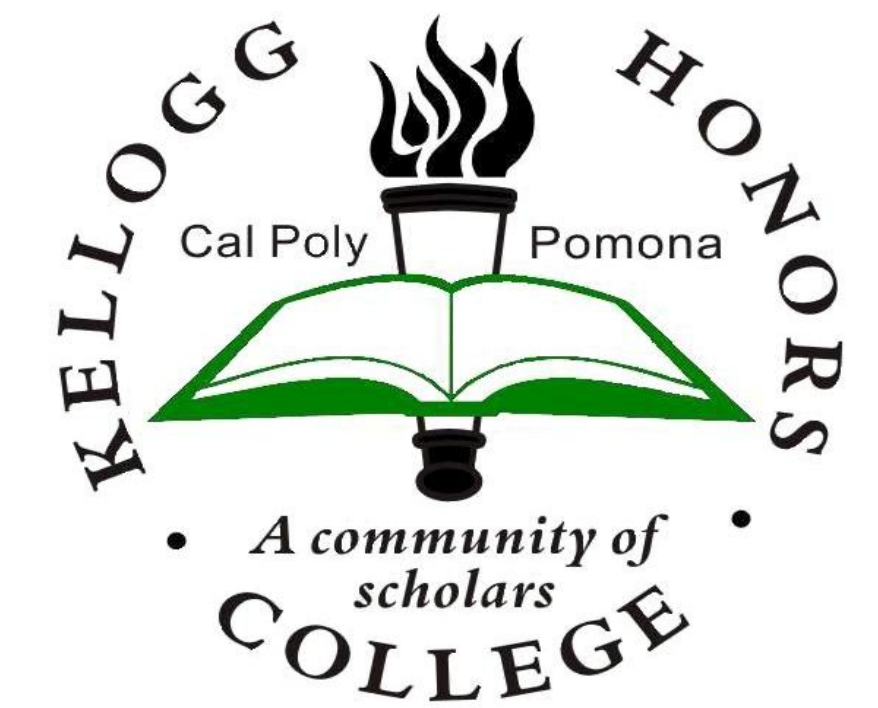
Rediscovering Counterpoint: An Introduction to Polyphonic Composition



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Kellogg Honors College Capstone Project

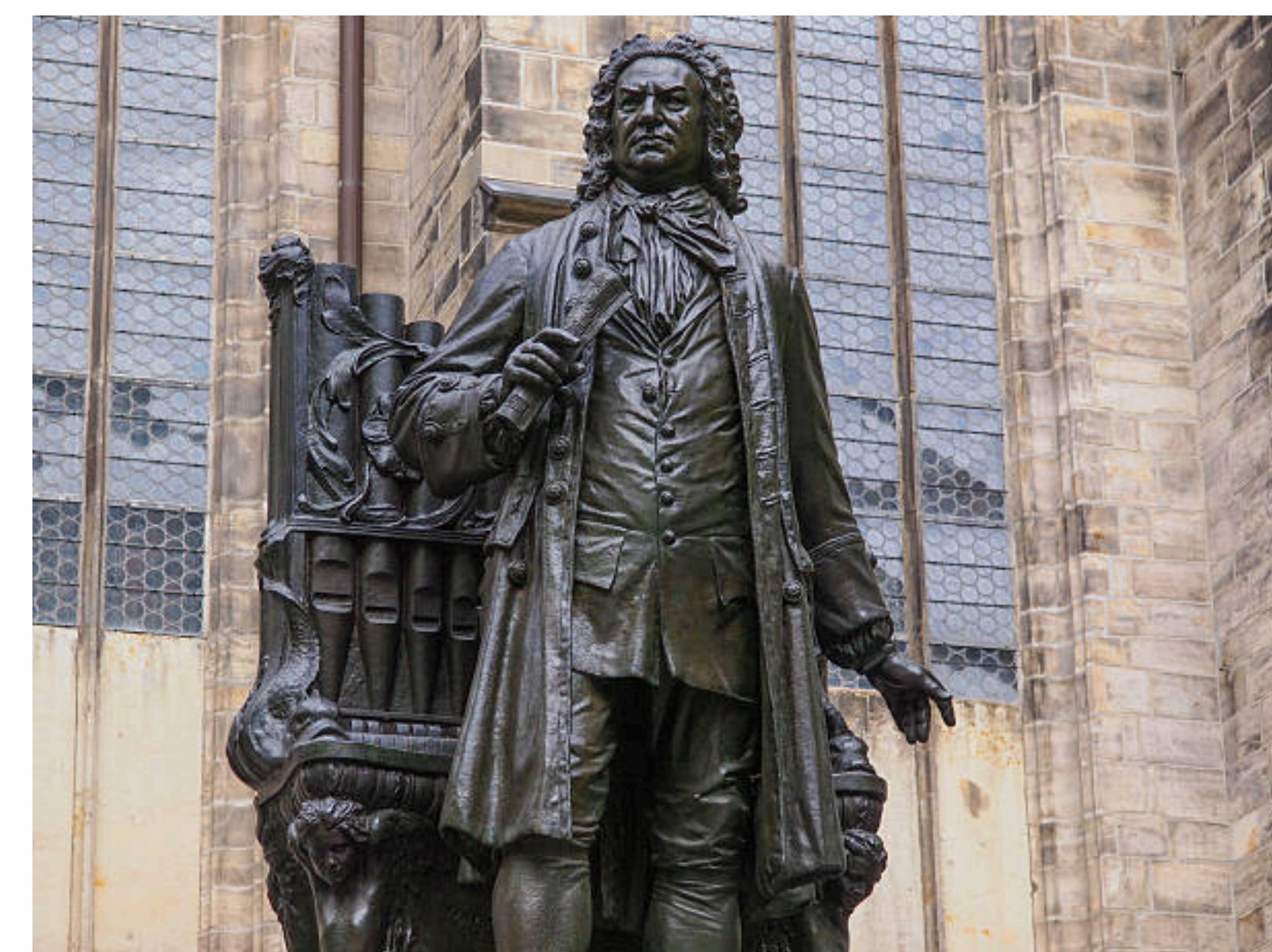


Background

Abstract

For this project, I composed three musical pieces using a technique called polyphony. Polyphony (also referred to as counterpoint) is a term used to describe music that is formed by several different melodic lines, that when played together, form a harmonic progression. By contrast, most music heard today consists of a single melodic line that sits on top of a harmony (homophony). Polyphony was the favored style of the Baroque musical period, and the most famous composer of this era is Johann Sebastian Bach. My inspiration for this project was Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, in which he writes eighteen original polyphonic compositions all based off a single melodic phrase, called a subject. Similarly, the pieces I composed for this project are also based off a single subject. The first piece is a chorale prelude - a piece meant to serve as brief introduction to a sung church hymn. The second piece is a canon, which means that one melodic line is a copy of the other. The final piece is a fugue. Fugues have three or more melodic lines that begin with the subject and develop it in a way that is related to but distinct from the other melodies.

Johann Sebastian Bach and The Art of Fugue



Johann Sebastian Bach is widely considered to be the undisputed master of polyphonic composition, and many even consider him to be the greatest composer who ever lived. Over the course of his life, he composed thousands of pieces and wrote in every genre of his time except opera; he wrote sonatas, partitas, and suites for almost every instrument. He also wrote concertos, chamber music, chorales, oratorios, and even a Mass (which is nearly two hours long). *The Art of Fugue* was one of his last compositions, and in fact, he died before it could be completed. The fact that Bach was able to find such an incredible amount of diversity in a single musical phrase amazed me, and *The Art of Fugue* became my inspiration for this project.

What is Polyphony

As mentioned in the abstract, polyphony is a style of musical composition that utilizes multiple, independent melodic lines. The best way to talk about polyphony is to show it in action, so I have highlighted sections in each of my pieces below to help illustrate how polyphony works. Due to limited space, I have only displayed the first page of each piece on this poster.

Compositions

Chorale Prelude

David Magluyan



The chorale prelude is the simplest of the three pieces. The section highlighted in red at the beginning is the subject that is shared by all the compositions. The second highlighted section is the inversion of the subject - that is, the subject played upside down. Notice that each line in the score has movement, and each acts as its own independent melody.

Inventio

David Magluyan



The canon is a musical form in which there is only one melodic line, and all the other lines are copies of that first line. The subject from the Chorale Prelude is highlighted in red. The top line opens by stating the subject, and this is echoed by the bottom line an octave lower. The blue highlighted parts show that the bottom line continues to copy the top line exactly. The green highlighted section is free material and does not get echoed by the bottom voice. After this first section, the bottom voice begins to lead by restating the subject at the fifth (the fifth note of the A minor scale). At this point, the first section gets repeated in a different key with the voices switched. This is a technique called invertible counterpoint. All the unhighlighted sections serve as modulations to new keys. This canon begins in A Minor and it modulates to E Minor. The last measure modulates to D Minor, which would be shown on the second page of the score.

Fuga

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The fugue is the most complex of the three pieces. For the fugue, I extended the subject to give myself more material to work with (it is highlighted in red again). Like the canon, the second voice enters by stating the subject, but it is stated at the fifth this time. The third voice finally enters with the subject restated at the octave. I composed the fugue using invertible counterpoint like the canon. The blue and green sections are called countersubjects. Notice that when the blue countersubject is restated, it has been inverted. This was done to avoid running into the other voices. Other small alterations had to be made when fitting the voices together again, but for the most part, it is still the same musical phrase. All the unhighlighted sections serve as modulations to new keys. This fugue begins in A Minor and modulates to E Minor immediately when the second voice enters with the subject. The small bridge before the entry of the third voice modulates back to A Minor. Finally, the piece modulates to C Major, where the second voice states the subject again. The rest of the fugue follows this general pattern.