

Prelude and Fugue: Polyphony and Organizational Practice

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In this reflective essay, composed in the likeness of a prelude and fugue, I explore how musical form can lend insight into navigating organizational complexity.

Prelude

There is a kind of consonance generated through artistic practice. Organizations may develop compatible systems and agreement among agents and actors. However, one may find fewer voices; more beauty, but less body, more lyricism, but less provocation, stemming from a lack of creative argumentation and competing perspectives. The prelude leads to something else, to a different form, be it a fugue or dance, or other movements in a sonata. Chopin and Debussy adopted them as a form in and of themselves – complete and discreet. I often performed Bach's preludes. In these, there is a latency, something waiting to burst out and introduce healthy complexity and an internal counterpoint to the piece. A sigh, a small release, opening space for the mind to wander.

Fugue

When I first learned to play Bach's fugues, my instructor taught me that they demonstrate polyphony – multiple voices competing against each other for dominance, distinct musical perspectives on the unifying subject – perhaps one behaving as an executive function and another as a dissenting view.

Subject

The musical conversation begins with the subject of the piece. In my earlier life the fugue form helped me make sense of my internal, emotional-psychological-physical experiences. One voice representing the emotional colour, another offering my gut interpretation, and one incorporating the views of trusted friends, teachers, or loved ones. When I finished practicing a fugue, not only had I developed better articulation at the keyboard, better command of my own musicality, better sight-reading skills, better memorization skills, and better rhythmic ability; more importantly, perhaps, I had processed my life experiences and

allowed the competing voices in my mind to be brought to bear in an embodied arena. A tone of urgency, countered by the demand for thoroughness, a reminder of collective values, a resonant communication of experience.

Episode

The fugal episode suggests that organizations, too, navigate complexity as priorities and ways of thinking interact (Edman & Stevens, 2025). This complexity can be generative and spur advancement as it is negotiated. I have wondered how the form of music known as the fugue might be utilized as a practice to process this complexity of embodied experience at the organization level, in addition to my lived reality as a musician, educator, and accountant. Organizational life, similar to the fugue form, can feel like the performance of a quartet on a single instrument, and provides insight into the importance and practical relevance of polyphony. It is not something to run away from in such environments, but rather something to run toward. The contrarian voice is respected rather than shunned, junior perspectives are heard, the lower register given prominence for a time as they compete against or reinforce each other in a productive way. Each individual is focused on the same topic, its meaning filtering through their experience, a reaction felt in their stomach and noted in their mind. A suggested challenge sits heavily in the room; the naysayer is persuaded by evidence, the ephemeral satisfaction of a proposed solution dissolving as it is found to be unfeasible.

Coda

Facilitated through a fugue-like practice, parallels may emerge. Dissonance, as per the first note of a musical sigh, seeks resolution, followed by another sigh, and another, forming a larger musical phrase. A fermata on a whole rest suggests a pause within a broader momentum, the performer and audience keeping the rhythmic count loosely into the next bar. Voices continue, repeating, countering, inverting, changing key and tone, around the subject of the piece. Bach's work, *The Art of Fugue*, itself is without ending, the performer in practice deciding where to take themselves, their audience, and the piece. The cycle is felt, and temporality transformed (Chapin, 2010). Those involved are buzzing at the end, walking away from the keyboard or the concert hall having achieved not only musical, but also, for a time, personal and organizational clarity. This consonance, like all preludes, brims with anticipation of what's to come.

References

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About the author

Douglas Stuart is a scholar-practitioner who teaches management, finance, and accounting at the Gustavson School of Business. A trained pianist and CPA, he frequently uses musical forms as conceptual and embodied filters for understanding teaching, learning, and organizational experience. He is currently a doctoral student at the University of Calgary, where his research focuses on sustainability reporting and performance. Alongside this work, he maintains a longstanding interest in organizational aesthetics and the ways artistic practice can illuminate the complexities of organizational life.