



Art of Fugue

“Daddy, what’s the highest number? I want to count to it.”
Ambitious words from my six-year-old Aidan. He could not conceive of a number too high for him to count!

What is the similarity between mathematics and music? In math, there is an infinite amount of numbers and in music there is an infinite number of possibilities in composition. No two songs are alike. To demonstrate this, Bach wrote the Art of Fugue, 14 different fugues all developed from the same theme which when played all together, continue for well over an hour. Two of them, the “mirror fugues,” can even be played upside down from beginning to end!

Strangely, the fourteenth fugue was left unfinished in the middle of a phrase. Bach’s own son wrote in the manuscript that Bach died in the middle of writing it! This has since been proven to be untrue (perhaps he wanted to sell more copies!), but music historians are undecided as to why it was left unfinished. To be used as a didactic tool? “See if YOU can complete this,” Bach may have smiled as his went on to other projects. Bach’s message may have been something else, a statement on the infinite possibilities inherent in that one musical theme.

Bach often signed his pieces “Soli Deo Gloria” or “To God Alone Be Glory.” Could the Art of Fugue be an evangelistic praise of the God he loved, the God who is infinite? Even a relationship with this God provides limitless things to ponder. Regardless of the purpose, the Art of Fugue is at least an exploration of the endless creative act in Creation, which points directly to the Creator himself.