

Hewitt finds hidden depths in didactic score

The Art of the Fugue Angela Hewitt, piano Dominion-Chalmers Church Thursday at 8 p.m.

No one knows for sure what instrument Bach had in mind when he wrote his monumental Art of the Fugue.

It is written in open score, that is each voice has its own staff. It is sometimes conjectured that he did not intend it for performance at all, but rather set it down as a treatise on the many ways that one might compose a fugue based on a handful of subjects.

It is frequently performed on the organ, but also on the harpsichord and by string quartets. Then there's the piano, an instrument of which Bach had virtually no experience.

Angela Hewitt has been demonstrating for many years that the piano is indeed a suitable instrument for Bach. She has been preparing The Art of the Fugue for about 18 months now, and Ottawa was privileged to hear her only North American performance of it this year on Thursday evening.

Before the performance, Hewitt gave an informative talk on how the work is constructed. She suggested that there is considerable depth and human feeling to be found within the severely didactic score, and she found it.

The work consists of 14 fugues, or Contrapuncti as Bach calls them, and four Canons. Given that they are all based on related subjects, it's remarkable how much potential variety Bach achieved in the score and especially how well Hewitt realized it. Contrapunctus III had a lightness of touch combined with a lucidity of texture that made it thoroughly appealing. The same, in fact, could be said for much of the score. There were instances in which a light touch would not be appropriate, but the clarity of line was constant throughout.

Another highlight was Hewitt's engrossing account of Contrapunctus XI. She took what often comes across as grey and pedantic and made it exciting and memorable. All five of the canons were outstanding as well.

At the end of Contrapunctus XIV, which Bach did not live to complete, Hewitt played a chorale that Bach is believed to have dictated on his death bed. It has been called variously Wann wir in hochten Noten sein and Vor deinem Thron tret ich hiermit. Either text fits the music.

A wonderful achievement by the woman who has been called, in these pages and elsewhere, the Bach pianist for our time.