Transcribing and Completing The Art of Fugue: The Case of Berio’s Contrapunctus XIX

Because of its lack of specific instrumentation and its incompleteness, Bach’s The Art of Fugue has provided especially fertile ground for composers interested in the transcription of pre-existing music and in the completion of unfinished works. One such composer was Luciano Berio (1925-2003), who throughout his career transcribed pieces by a variety of authors, ranging from Monteverdi to Brahms, and composed completions of such notable works as Puccini’s Turandot. In 2000, on occasion of the 250th anniversary of Bach’s death, Berio received a commission from the Teatro Lirico Sperimentale of Spoleto, Italy, to lead a project of transcription of The Art of Fugue for chamber orchestra. In this project, several notable composers, such as Louis Andriessen, Aldo Clementi, Luis De Pablo, Fabio Vacchi, and Berio himself, each transcribed a contrapunctus from The Art of Fugue. The project was completed in 2001 and received its premiere in Spoleto that year. Given Berio’s interest in unfinished works, his contribution to the project not surprisingly resulted in a transcription of an incomplete contrapunctus, which Berio finished by means of a short and rather enigmatic coda.

In this paper, I will provide an analysis of the compositional strategies that Berio adopted in this hitherto neglected work. To do so, I will read Berio’s approach to Bach’s unfinished contrapunctus against the long-standing tradition of transcriptions of The Art of Fugue. In addition, I will place Berio’s Contrapunctus XIX in the context of his aesthetics of transcription and completion, as articulated in his writings and as practiced in works like his ending of Puccini’s Turandot, also from 2001, which is as enigmatic and understated as the completion of Bach’s contrapunctus.