The History of the "Art of the Fugue"
by Wolfgang Graesser.

I am to report regarding the history of the "Art of the Fugue".

The old question: "How did you arrive at the idea? How was it that you saw what six generations had passed heedlessly, unseeing, by?

I reply hesitatingly and unwillingly, as I should have to tell of the innermost enlightenments of my brief, as yet, groping and unshaped being, nearly the half of which is most intimately interwoven with this strangest of fates of Bach's last work.

When I recall, there are moments of an appealing sublimity such as the humdrum man will never be able to understand. Why talk about it? Have you ever stood as a lone being in a sky of steel-blue, surrounded by the drone of the sun on an ice-clad peak of a high mountain?

The inner history! It is profound, full, intoxicating, penetrating to the deepest marrow of one's being, where human existence merges itself into the be-all of life.

But I will not think of the outer history, because in doing so I am ever and anon overwhelmed by a sensation of bitter pain, which needs must devolve both into hate and pity. But bitterness is poison to thy rising sap. If I am nevertheless compelled to think of it, it is because capricious hands are also meddling with this Holy of Holies of the mind; because the "Art of the Fugue" is perhaps the most affecting "Something" set in immortal form which has been forced from the soul of a Western being.

The outer history: When Bach began to ripen towards
eternity, he wrote his last titanic works— they are many in number, but no one knows them or rather, the whole world passes them by, passes through them—wrote them in loneliness, scarcely divined by a few personal pupils. He had them engraved on copper and thereby graved for all time his wonderful writing in the red metal. They were intended by him as a bequest to consign them to posterity. For him all else was preparation, training, pastime and study. He published his first work as Opus 1 when he was more than 40 years old. But even the 175 years which have passed over the world-stage since his death have not yet enabled us to penetrate to that which Bach considered worthy, to bequeathed to posterity. The image of "the Greatest of all Germans" who conquered music in himself, was indeed developed from those preliminary studies into the actual masterpieces, the twelve polyphonous titanic works of the last years of his life (about 1738—1750). It is a symbolic fact that Bach, both to his contemporaries and the world, was most famed for his virtuosity on the organ and for the compositions which date from the Weimar period.

The second period of the Bach appreciation, of which we appear to be in the closing stage, and on which the century of Romance has engraved its own features, disclosed the "medium" Bach and attempted to resurrect its dwindling strength in him. To this period belong, as it were, all works which have to-day penetrated into the outermost layers of cultural consciousness: the instrumental works, the well-known symphonic and organ works, sonatas, and concertos, and the well-known cantatas, great Passions and finally the High Mass. I would again emphasise that Bach did not publish all these works. All the works of the last period however, he had printed, although no considerable sale could
be expected.

These last works, however, are in fact all gigantic, hour-long fantasies on the organ, which have been evolved at the organ and are only understandable when played on the organ. As landmarks I would mention: Exercise for the Piano III ("An Organ Mass"), Exercise for the Piano IV (Goldberg Variations), the last Preludes and Fugues for the Organ (N.B. nearly all wrongly understood and dated). The last Choral Cantatas, the canonic alterations to "From the High Heavens", the "Musical Sacrifice" and the crowning effort "The Art of the Fugue", his last and uncompleted work. Whereas the Canonic Variations are annotated for the organ (N.B. scored for four voices) but are scarcely playable any longer, Bach in the "Musical Sacrifice" and "Art of the Fugue" took the final definite step which Beethoven did not dare to take, away from inadequate instrument; he spared himself - in view of the inadequate nature of the material - from giving indications regarding orchestration necessary for achieving the desired tonal effects.

The only possibility was found after 9 years' work, i.e. an increased elaboration of the organ for the purpose of Bach orchestration, with its polyphonic "sound colours", which can only be registered on organs built on a large scale.

Nearly all his subsequent works still await resurrection. The first to be heard was the Art of the Fugue which was played for the first time in Leipzig on the 16th of June 1927; the other works will now follow.

The history of the "Art of the Fugue" is a very disappointing tragedy of human shortcomings, pettiness and stupidity. It is an indelible blot on the cultural history of Europe and of Germany in particular. They withheld recognition, misunderstood, tore asunder, crushed and jeered at
the most famous men in practical and theoretical music. The copper plates of the first impression were sold by public auction by Bach's own son for the value of the metal. Only those who know the preliminary story of the original Leipzig performance and the bitter struggles lasting for four years can believe what painful, vile sentiments prevail in the circle of those responsible for modern musical culture, (and they will have again to experience the annihilating consequences on themselves). Now that the hotly disputed goal is reached, I often ask myself in timid doubts of conscience: Have I done rightly to lift the veil or am I guilty of the greatest sin - the sin against the Holy Ghost?