

From program notes for the premiere  
By Laurie Shulman ©2018

*What Do We Make of Bach* comprises three principal parts played without pause. The sectional structure of the large Part II relates to the Baroque organ *fantasia*, which allowed for improvisatory passages and sudden alterations of mood between and among its component segments. It also gave the composer considerable freedom from traditional forms, though often maintaining contrapuntal textures. Imitation plays a prominent role throughout Harbison's piece. Sometimes it is shared between organ and orchestra, elsewhere solely in the *obbligato* organ.

Listeners familiar with *The Art of Fugue* or *A Musical Offering* may recognize each of those fugue subjects' initial phrases in retrograde or inversion in Harbison's *Fantasia, soggetti prestiti*. "I chose those two versions because Bach did not use them; they are not suitable for his treatment," he explains. "Hats off to anyone who recognizes their source. I thought of them as hidden connections."

Those phrases, beginning with a dialogue between organ and brass, eventually expand to woodwinds and strings. Their conversation leads to the cadenza, an interlude for organ solo that is both virtuosic and improvisational. It in turn cedes to an imitative *Canzone* in more relaxed tempo, then a brief Antiphon, an ancient liturgical form associated with antiphonal psalmody. Harbison adapts it as a bit of call and response between organ and orchestra (strings and brass). Winds rejoin the ensemble for the Chorale, whose countermelody gives it more the feeling of a chorale-fantasy.

*What Do We Make of Bach* concludes, of course, with a fugue: what other culmination would be suitable for a composition inspired by a lifetime with Bach's music?

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2<sup>nd</sup> doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (2<sup>nd</sup> doubling English horn), 2 clarinets (2<sup>nd</sup> doubling bass clarinet), 2 bassoons (2<sup>nd</sup> doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, *obbligato* organ and strings.