

Margot Singer, *Underground Fugue* (Melville House, 2017)

Can a novel be a fugue? This is the question US writer Margot Singer asks herself, implicitly in her first novel, *Underground Fugue*, and explicitly in a *Paris Review* article. ‘Could I write a novel about fugues in the form of a fugue? The idea was thrilling.’¹ As I have been pondering questions about the links between music and literature recently, the article caught my attention and I decided to read the novel.

Singer’s four protagonists are temporary neighbours in early twenty-first century London. Lonia, a refugee from Hitler’s Europe, is dying. Her daughter Esther has come from America to look after her in her final weeks. Next door, Javad, a neurologist originally from Iran, lives in a state of preoccupied alienation from his teenage son, Amir, whose secret life he hardly suspects. Threaded through the narrative, anchored by a prologue, is the slowly developing story of a mysterious man who has washed up on a beach in Kent without identification, unable or unwilling to speak in any language but the music he plays on the piano in the mental institution.

He plays for hours, his body swaying, his fingers tracing patterns along the keys: chord progressions, arpeggios, halftones, quavers, counterpoint.

Listen: everything you want to know is in the music.

The voices rise and fall, call and answer, take flight. (4)

Javad is called in as a consultant to see if he can help this man, ‘a possible case of dissociative fugue’ (57). Esther follows the story in a desultory way in the media, between other more pressing personal concerns. Esther is herself an amateur pianist and Javad hears her through the party wall playing Bach fugues on her mother’s old German piano. The narrative flow is handed back and forth among the four characters, mother and daughter, father and son, each in turn taking up themes of flight and connection, memory and loss. Their lives touch, intersect, part, combine, separate again. Each of the seven parts starts the pattern of countervoices again, with variations introduced to the order and the number of the voices as the novel progresses. Structure is clearly vital.

But can a novel be a fugue? Singer is not the first to take up the challenge of trying out the idea. As she writes, somewhat wryly, in her *Paris Review* article, ‘The sheer difficulty of translating a musical fugue into prose actually seems to have attracted many writers to the project, although – perhaps fortunately – I didn’t know it when I set out to try.’ Perhaps one challenge of writing in a musical form is deciding how explicit to make the connection. For me, a line is crossed when Esther, fleeing from the demands of nursing her dying mother, happens upon a lunchtime performance of Bach’s *Art of Fugue*. Esther reads the program notes: they are quoted:

¹ Margot Singer, ‘Can a Novel be a Fugue?’, *Paris Review* 31 July 2017. Online. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/07/31/can-a-novel-be-a-fugue/>

The fugue, she reads, is both metaphor and form. Its variations make connections between seemingly unlike things and reveal the ways in which the new is recreated out of the material of the old. It shows us how the present is always in conversation with – in counterpoint with – the past. (73)

The passage describing the concert – her immersion in the music, and the paths of memory and speculation she traverses while the music washes around and through her – is Singer at her best, lyrical and trenchant. My only reservation is whether the reference needed to be quite so obvious. Perhaps it did: it is understandable that in the structure of the fugue, one of the most complex and demanding artistic forms of all, Singer was able to find a metaphor which showed her a way forward with her novel: ‘the form was what I needed to open up the story’, she writes.

A novel can’t *be* a fugue. What works in music can’t literally work in narrative: although there are similarities, the differences cannot be dissolved. But a novel can be contrapuntal, cerebral, intricate, beautiful, powerful; combining voices at different registers to make a harmonious whole. *Underground Fugue* is all those things. It doesn’t need to be a fugue; it can partake of the nature of a musical form but still be a wonderful novel, doing all the things a novel can do which a fugue – or any musical form – can’t do. And thank goodness her chance encounter with the idea of the fugue – psychological and musical – helped Singer find her way when she was lost in the maze of writing her first novel.

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