

Essential Fugal Closure (EFC): Exploring the Concluding Gesture in J. S. Bach's BWV 846b-893b

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Abstract

Solá Chagas Lima (2023) proposes that the return to the tonic harmony (I, i) in the concluding portion of Baroque fugues—as concomitant with tonic cadential punctuations—satisfies the minimum requirement for tonal closure of the overall form. In building upon the concept of essential closures (EEC and ESC) in Hepokoski & Darcy's (2006) text, Solá (2023) considers the essential fugal closure (EFC) as a gesture contingent on four interdependent elements: (1) the nature of the tonic cadence itself; (2) potential pedal points at the tonic and dominant scale degrees; (3) the presence of a Coda along with a temporary tonicization of the subdominant harmony; and (4) the final tonic cadence (fTC). The present theoretical study documents and classifies EFCs in BWV 846b-893b according to six archetypes arising from the aforementioned interdependence, calculating the statistical prevalence of these archetypes and their role in establishing formal proportion in Bach's fugal writing. The study concludes with a discussion of the centrality of Bach's work in defining Baroque fugal counterpoint.

Method

The interchangeable concepts of essential expositional closure (EEC) and essential structural/formal closure (ESC) play a prominent role in Hepokoski & Darcy's (2006) sonata theory. In discussing tonal closure in larger forms in Galant and Classical repertoires, scholars identify form as mutually dependent on motivic ("rhetorical") content and a tonal plan (Caplin, 1998). The successful attainment and establishment of tonally prominent harmonies help punctuate formal structure via (1) a perfect authentic cadential closures at the dominant (V:PAC) in the expositional space (EEC) and (2) a perfect authentic cadential closure at the tonic (I:PAC) in the recapitulatory space (ESC).

In Baroque fugal counterpoint, expositional and developmental spaces are looser and more recurrent formal sections, and cadential gestures can feature both authentic and non-authentic cadences at key harmonies (Solá Chagas Lima, 2023). Often, cadential gestures at the tonic which bear a prominent role in defining formal structure, will feature perfect/imperfect authentic cadences (e.g. I:PAC or I:IAC) and non-authentic cadences (V-I cadences with other voice-leading patterns) alike, although the latter are rarer than the former. Like later specimens of tonal repertoire, the tonal Baroque fugue features a departure and return to the tonic harmony.

In building upon Hepokoski & Darcy's (2006)

proposition that cadential closures at the tonic are fundamental for formal design, Solá Chagas Lima (2023) points to the role of the essential role of such gestures in Baroque fugues. In the present study, we document and analyze the concluding portion in the fugal work of J. S. Bach, with special attention to one of the richest and most comprehensive fugal compendium in his output—the fugues in the two-volume *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (BWV 846b-893b). Our analysis used the theoretical framework proposed by Solá Chagas Lima (2023) to identify cadences, pedal points, subject entries, and formal spaces in and around the closing portion of these fugues.

Results and Analysis

In our survey of these forty-eight fugues, we found that their concluding portion features a dialogue between four interdependent elements: (1) the tonic cadence itself; (2) a potential pedal point at the tonic ($\hat{1}^{\wedge}$, I, or i) and/or at the dominant ($\hat{5}^{\wedge}$, V, or v) scale degrees; (3) the presence of a subsequent Coda along with a temporary tonicization of the subdominant harmony (IV or iv); and (4) the final tonic cadence (fTC), if different from the EFC. In considering the tonic cadential gesture that punctuates the last formal space of these fugues—hereafter labelled Section *n* (Solá Chagas Lima, 2023)—as the essential fugal closure (EFC), we considered six hypothetical archetypes (Figures 1 to 6). These archetypes meet the minimum harmonic requirements for tonal return set forth in Solá Chagas Lima (2023).

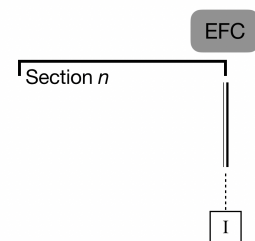


Figure 1. Archetype 1: EFC with tonic cadence (EFC = fTC).

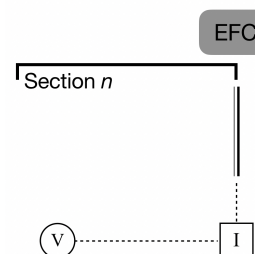


Figure 2. Archetype 2: EFC with dominant pedal and tonic cadence (EFC = fTC).

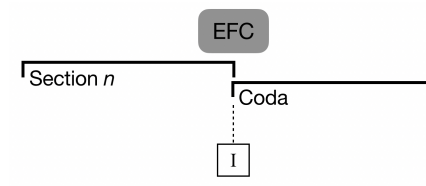


Figure 3. Archetype 3: EFC with tonic cadence and coda without tonic pedal (EFC ≠ fTC).

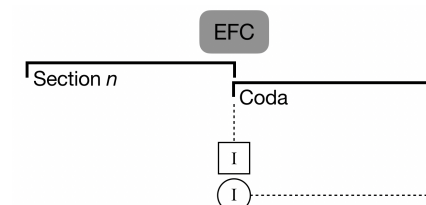


Figure 4. Archetype 4: EFC with tonic cadence and tonic pedal (EFC = fTC).

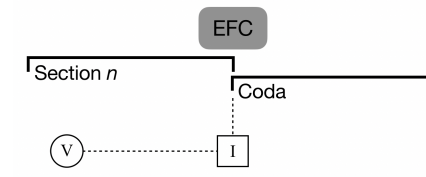


Figure 5. Archetype 5: EFC with dominant pedal and tonic cadence (EFC ≠ fTC).

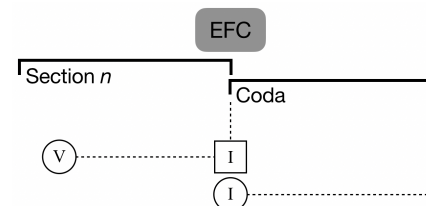


Figure 6. Archetype 6: EFC with dominant pedal, tonic cadence, and tonic pedal (EFC = fTC).

We did not consider loose pedals that appear outside Section *n* (earlier in the fugue) as part of the cadential gesture analyzed in this research. We also did not consider tonic cadences that happen too early in the piece as EFC candidates (Solá, 2014; 2023).

Discussion

Archetypical Statistical Prevalence

All archetypes were observed, with Archetype 1 being the most recurrent and Archetype 5 being absent.

Archetype	Book 1 (n=24)	%	Book 2 (n=24)	%	Total (n=48)	%
1	13	54.16	14	58.33	27	56.25
2	2	8.33	0	0	2	4.16
3	2	8.33	8	33.33	10	20.83
4	4	16.66	1	4.16	5	10.41
5	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	3	12.5	1	4.16	4	8.33

Figure 6. Summary table of statistical prevalence.

Proportion

Solá Chagas Lima (2014) discusses the role of proportion in defining the point of expositional and structural closures when the essential closure takes place too early in the form. In applying this principle to fugue, we have found that the EFC takes place, in average, at 97.18% into the structure in WTC Book 1 and at 95.24% in WTC Book 2.

Conclusion

Bach's approach to fugue is instrumental in defining this compositional technique. His "late" usage of what soon became a "learned style" (topic theory) amidst newer Galant aesthetics crowns and age of contrapuntal writing unparalleled in other repertoire. The fugues in the *Well-Tempered Clavier* are arguably among the most important specimens in Baroque repertoire, along with *The Art of Fugue* (BWV 1080) and *The Musical Offering* (BWV 1079). Their fundamental tonality, often in distant keys, helps establish the preference for equal temperament and the growing polarization between the tonic and dominant harmonies. An understanding of Bach's practices in fugal counterpoint in BWV 846b-893b sheds light on other important instrumental fugues in his own output and the Baroque at large.

References

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