A 18TH CENTURY INSTRUCTION ON WRITING TWO PART FUGUES

The organist and composer Albrechtsberger, known as the famous teacher of Beethoven, wrote an instruction on composing, named "Gründliche Anweisung zur Composition mit deutlichen und ausführlichen Exempeln, zum Selbstunterrichte (1790) erläutert". So for self−directed learning. Reading this instruction makes it clear that Albrechtsberger was a pedagogue par excellence. His text on composing a two part fugue (chapter 24) demonstrates that Albrechtsberger is able to instruct a student only with a few tips and tricks. His examples are well chosen and easy to understand. Some of them extends his theory in a natural way as if he is sitting near us, pushing us in the right direction.

In this paper I will review his text on the two part fugue. Papers on three and more part fugue writing will follow.

1. Why writing fugues?

Albrechtsberger defines the fugue as the most important genre of church music. Knowing that almost every composer in the 18th century was organist or Kapellmeister at a church, we can state that writing fugues was a skill, needed to be a fine church musician.

2. Vocal fugues in stile antico

Albrechtsberger illustrated his text with three examples of two part fugues, which are in fact vocal fugues. This means that the voices of the fugues are within a limited tonal range (maximum abitus: an octave; Albrechtsberger: 'zwischen den fünf Linien') and have no leaps greater than an octave. So they could be sung although the words in Albrechtsberger's examples are missing.

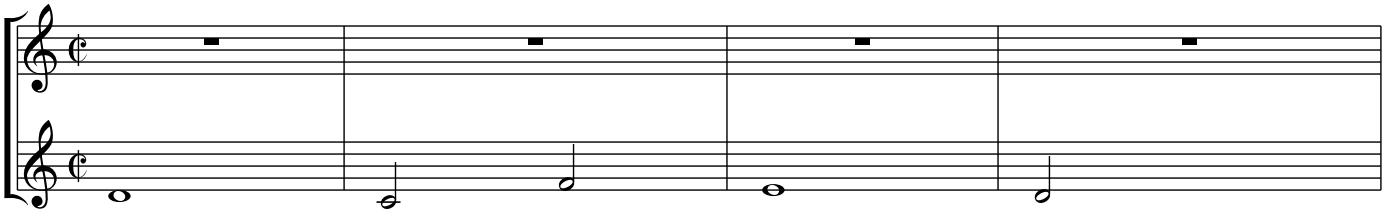
The fugue examples refers to the practice of the 'stile antico', a high Baroque church music imitation of late Renaissance musical style (with the music of Palestrina as model), in which composers controlled the use of dissonance and in which instrumental textures and rich ornamentation were avoided (cf. Monteverdi's prima prattica). Stile antico was the compositional device in the classic text−book on strict counterpoint 'Gradus Ad Parnassum (1725) of J. J. Fux, who was Albrechtsberger's predecessor of the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna.

3. Fugue concepts

3.1. 'Thema' or 'Hauptsatz '

'Thema' or 'Hauptsatz' (nowadays called 'subject' or 'dux') is the melody the fugue starts with, which is the subject of the fugue. It recurs frequently in the course of the composition. Read in 7.1 more about the subject in the fugue.

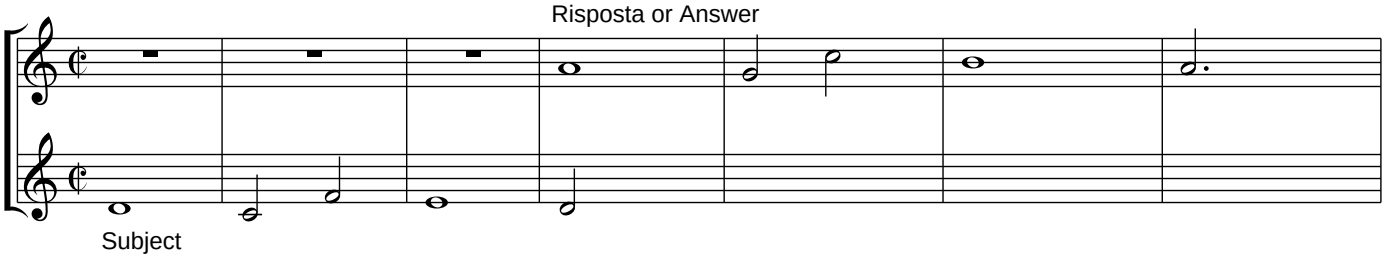
The subject in Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue is:



Thema or subject

3.2. Risposta (Responsum)

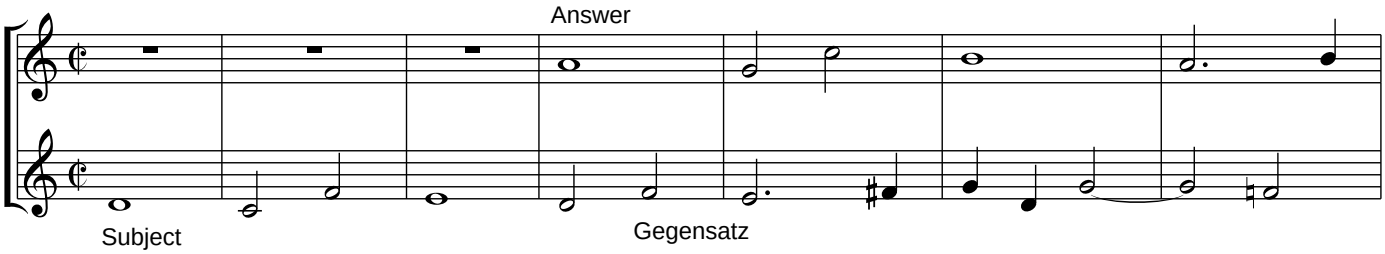
'Risposta' is nowadays called 'answer' or 'comes'. It is the second entry of the subject, a fifth higher or a fourth lower (Dominant). It can be modified to preserve the tonality of the fugue (in three or more part fugues: to facilitate the third etc. entry of the subject): Read in 7.3 more about the most frequent type of modification. The 'Risposta' in Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue is:



3.3. 'Gegensatz'

'Gegensatz' is the melody that accompanies the Risposta; better: the counterpoint to the Risposta (nowadays 'Gegensatz' is called free counterpoint; it is called countersubject if it also recurs in the course of the fugue). It can be seen as the follow−up of the subject. The 'Gegensatz' should have a rhythm that differs from the rhythm of the subject. Albrechtsberger suggests the use of syncopes and smaller notevalues; techniques which the student had learned in the fourth and fifth 'species' of his contrapuntal method (cf. chapter 9 − 22 of Albrechtsberger's 'Anweisung').

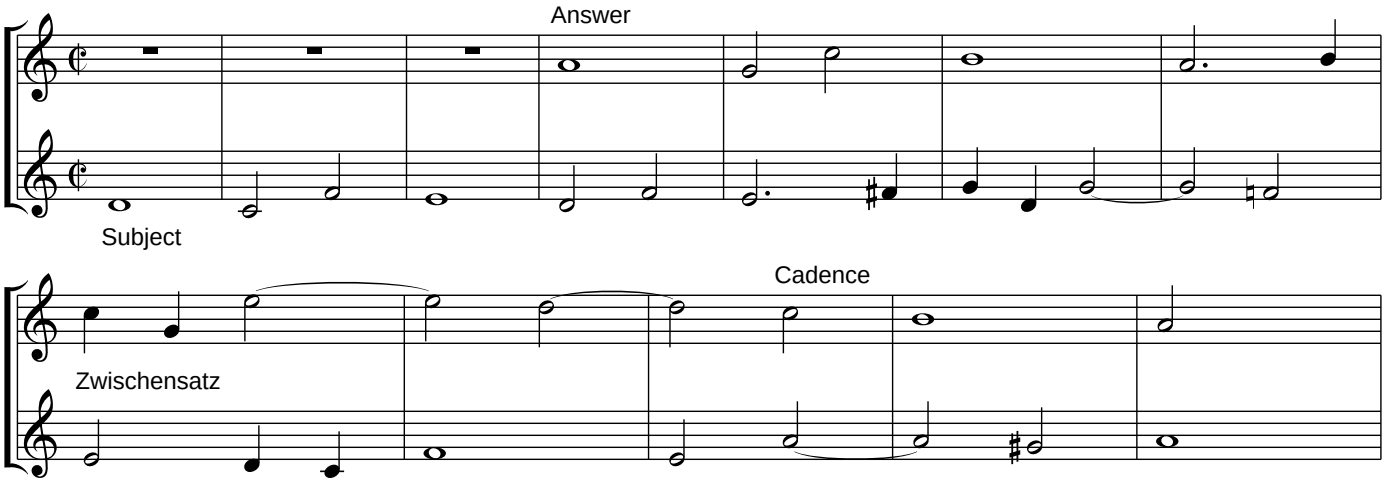
The 'Risposta' and 'Gegensatz' in Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue is:



3.4. 'Zwischensatz'

'Zwischensatz' is a 'Gedanken' similar to the subject or 'Gegensatz', following the 'Gegensatz' (to lengthen the fugue and to make the fugue more beautiful). It is more or less based on the subject or 'Gegensatz'. In three or more part fugues the 'Zwischensatz' could be based on material of accompanying voices, so not on subject or 'Gegensatz'. Nowadays 'Zwischensatz ', usually called 'episode', refers to more than one voice.

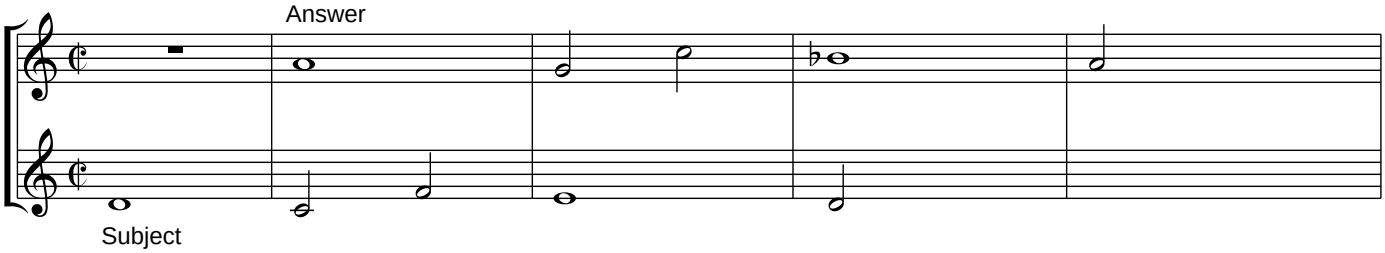
The first 'Zwischensatz' of Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue is:



3.5. ’Engführung’ (Restrictio, Ristretto)

’Engführung’ is nowadays called stretto. It refers to the imitation of the subject in close succession, so that the answer enters before the subject is completed.

An example of an ’Engführung’ in Albrechtsberger’s D minor fugue is:

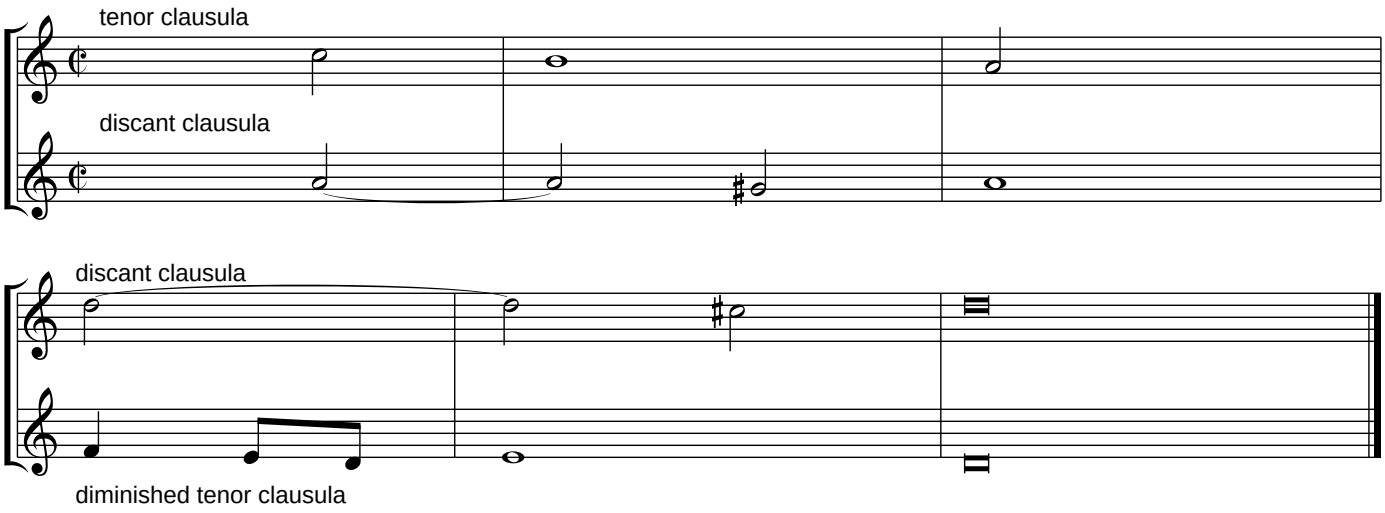


3.6. Other concepts

Albrechtsberger uses also the following concepts, which are explained in earlier chapters of his ’Anweisung’.

3.6.1. ’Cadenz’

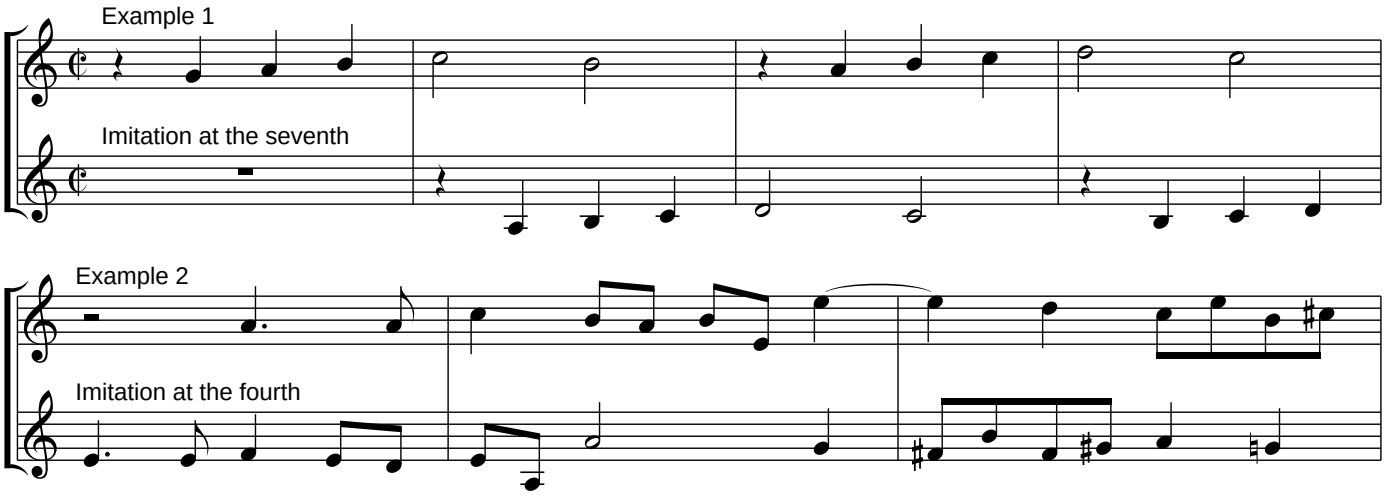
A cadence in two part fugues consists of a discant clausula and a tenor clausula. Both can be written in the upper or lower voice. Two examples from Albrechtsberger’s D minor fugue will suffice:



3.6.2. Imitation

Imitation is the use of similar, melodic material (usually a short figure) in different voices successively, at different pitch (e.g. the repetition starts fifth higher etc.) and at different intervals of time (after a quarter, a halve or a whole note etc.).

The following two examples are from Chapter 23 of Albrechtsberger's 'Anweisung' on imitation:



4. Structure of a fugue

A fugue consists of a two section succession, which is repeated. In Albrechtsberger's examples the two sections are repeated two times:

− section 1: subject and answer

− section 2: 'Zwischensatz' and cadence

− section 3: subject and answer

− section 4: 'Zwischensatz' and cadence

− section 5: subject and answer

− section 6: 'Zwischensatz' and cadence

Some authors uses the term Repercussio for the subject−answer sections 1, 3 and 5. In this case the fugue structure of Albrechtberger's examples is given with a short and simple formula:

(R1 + Z1) + (R1 + Z1) + (R1 + Z1)

where R = repercussio and Z = 'Zwischensatz' + cadence.

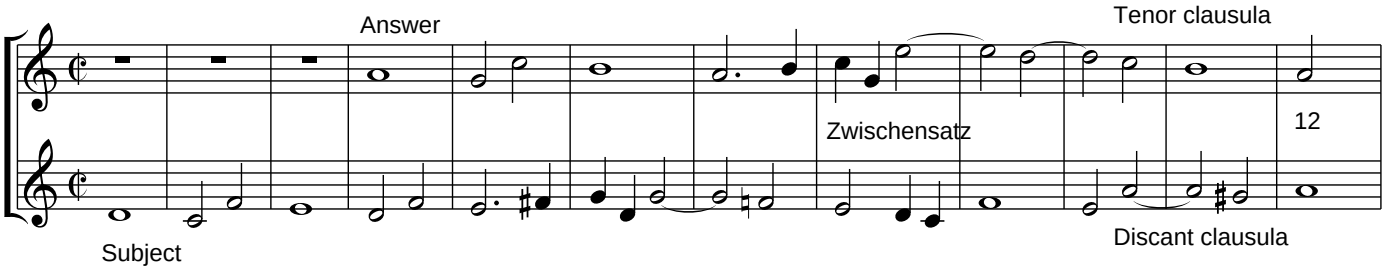
It stands without reason that the number of sections can be extended:

(R1 + Z1) + (R2 + Z2) ... + (Rn + Zn)

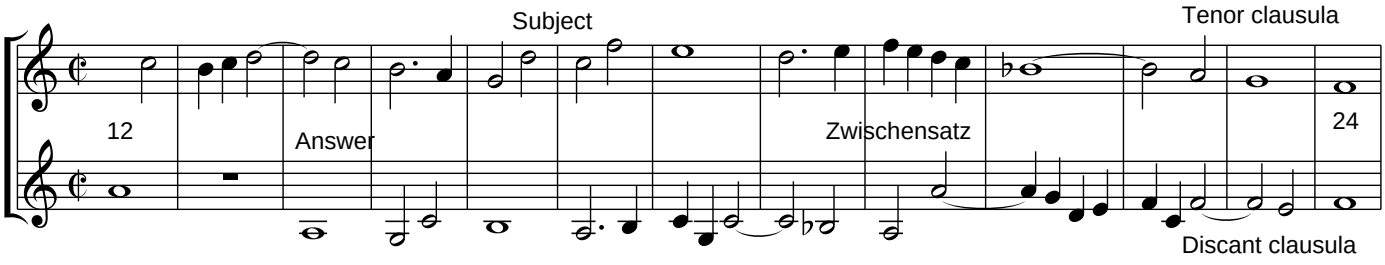
Note:

It is likely for pedagogical reasons that Albrechtsberger prescribes cadences at the end of the 'Zwischensatz'. Usually, in fugue writing cadences are for the sake of musical continuity evaded (melodically or harmonically −cf. Zarlino: fuggir la cadenza, 1558) or not written at all.

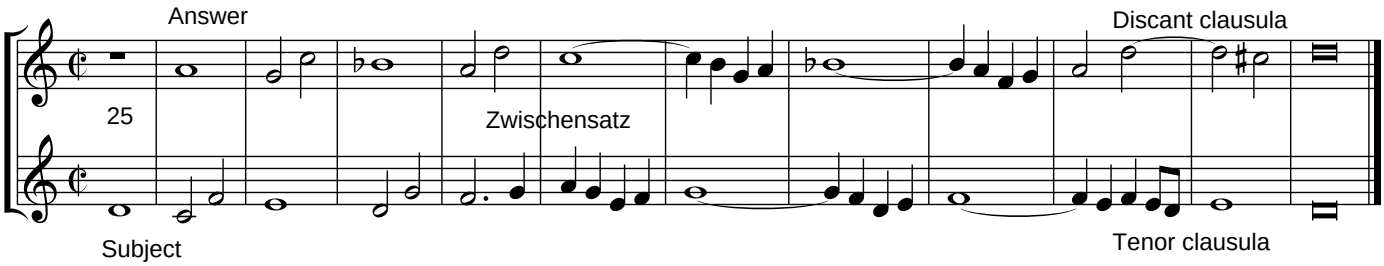
Section 1 and 2 from Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue:



Section 3 and 4 from Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue:



Section 5 and 6 from Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue:



5. Key−organization in a fugue

Albrechtsberger's fugue examples have three cadences, which show traditional tonal relationships. The cadence at the end defines the key which is established at the start of the fugue: the principal key. The other two cadences define two other keys that are related to the principal key. The first cadence is always in de dominant key (so when the principal key is major or minor). The second cadence is in the key a third above the principal key.

Example 1: F major − C major (first cadence) − a minor (second cadence)

Example 2: d minor − a minor (first cadence) − F major (second cadence)

Example 3: E phrygian − C major (first cadence) − G Major (second cadence)

Note that C and not B is the dominant of E phrygian

In Chapter 4 Albrechtsberger explains the relationships between keys and gives the following examples of 'natural' key progressions:

− Major key: C major − G major (#) − A minor − F major (b) − D minor (b) − E minor (#) − C major

− Minor key: A minor − C major − G major (#) − E minor (#) − D minor (b) − F major (b) − A minor

Note 1:

The successive keys have 0 or 1 accidental; in other words the relationships between keys is defined as the maximum accidental number difference of 0 or 1.

Note 2:

− B major/minor and other keys with more than 1 accidental are in C major not 'natural'

− B major/minor and other keys with more than 1 accidental are in A minor not 'natural'.

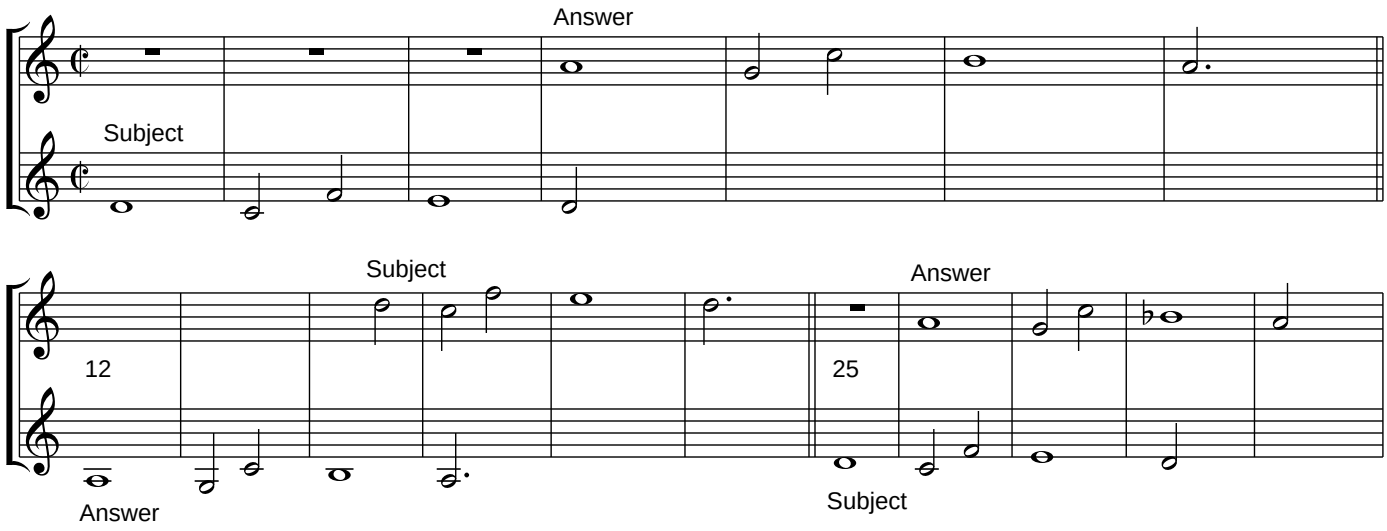
Albrechtsberger explains that these non familiar keys can be used − for the sake of variety − in works of a greater length.

In Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue the key−organization is D minor − A minor − F major − D minor

6. Pitch organization of the subject and answer

Curious, however, are Albrechtsberger's remarks on the pitch of the subject: the subject and/or answer in section 1, 3 and 5 starts on the same pitch! Voice exchange is used for reasons of 'varietas', variety. This pitch instruction is extremely useful when learning a fugue!

An example from Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue:



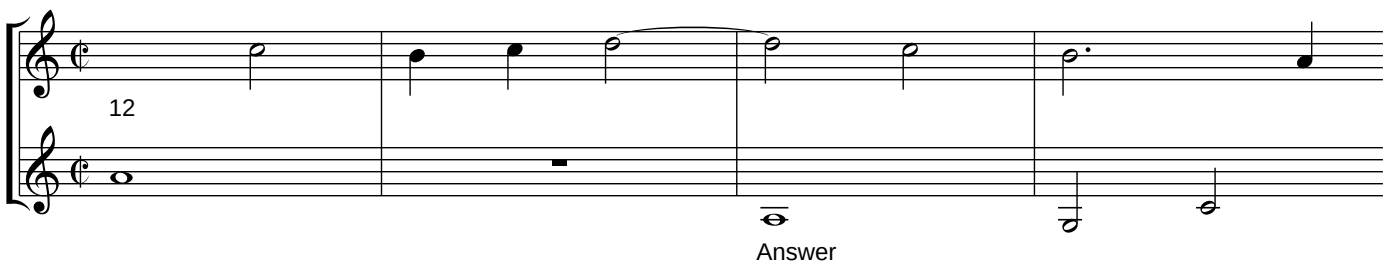
7. Special notes on the subject and answer

7.1. What is an appropiate subject?

The best fugue subjects are subjects that are apt to 'Engführung' (= stretto) with different intervals of time. Note that this is a technically defined issue on constructing subjects! The foregoing example shows stretti (singular: 'stretto') with different intervals of time (from Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue).

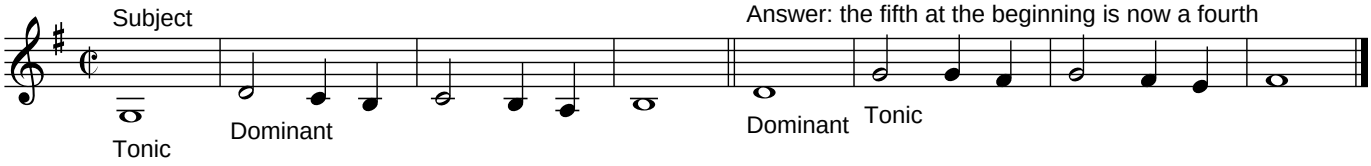
7.2. A nice tip!

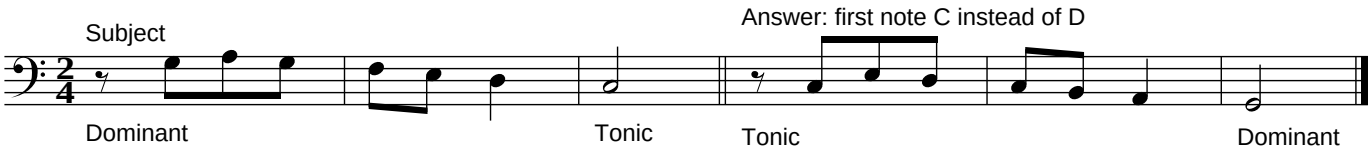
Albrechtsberger ends his text on two part fugue with the advice to use a rest or a leap before the entry of the subject. So the subject can better be heard! As an example the entry of the Risposta in bar 14 from Albrechtsberger's D minor fugue:

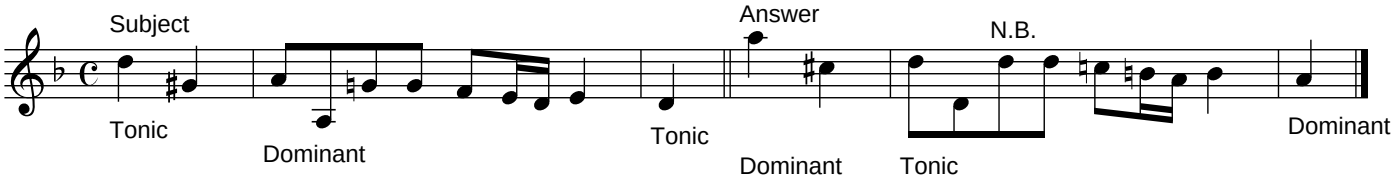


7.3. Modification of the answer

In case of a tonal answer (in contrast to a real answer) the answer as repetition of the subject can be modified to preserve tonality. This modification can be summarized as follows: the progression from tonic to dominant in the subject should usually be 'answered' as the progression from dominant to tonic. Albrechtsberger gives many examples of tonal and real answers. Now only three of the tonal answers will follow.







8. Albrechtsberger's two part fugues.

On the next pages the three two part examples of Albrechtsberger, slightly annotated, will follow.

The sound files can be downloaded at:

1. www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/albrechtsberger_fugue_d_minor.mp3
2. www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/albrechtsberger_fugue_F_major.mp3
3. www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/albrechtsberger_fugue_E_phrygian.mp3

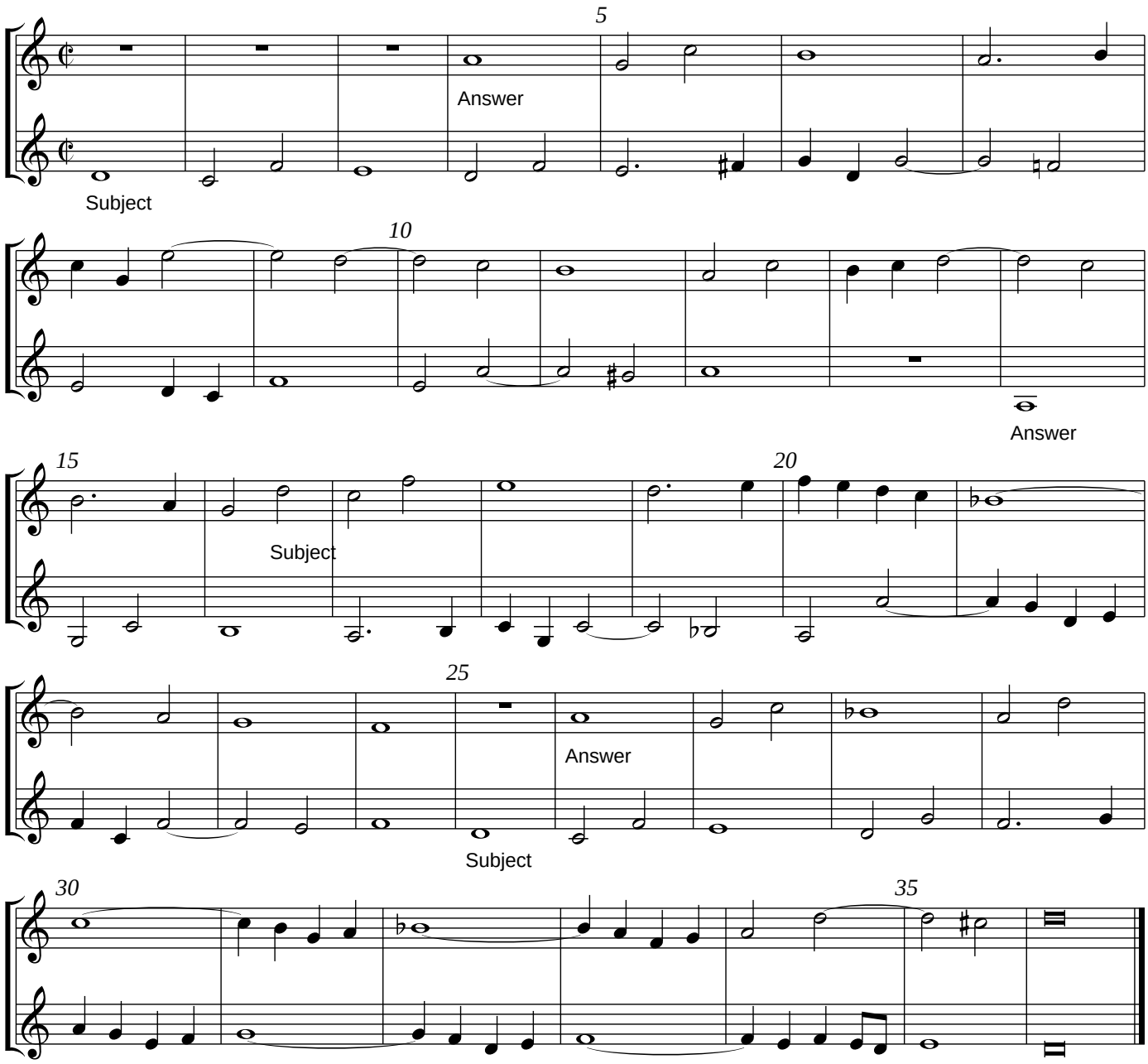
In loving memory of Barbe Vivien

This paper is written by Reinier Maliepaard, based on notes of Barbe Vivien.

This paper has been typeset with MC Musiceditor 6.0.1 (www.mcmusiceditor.com − www.bestmusicteacher.com)

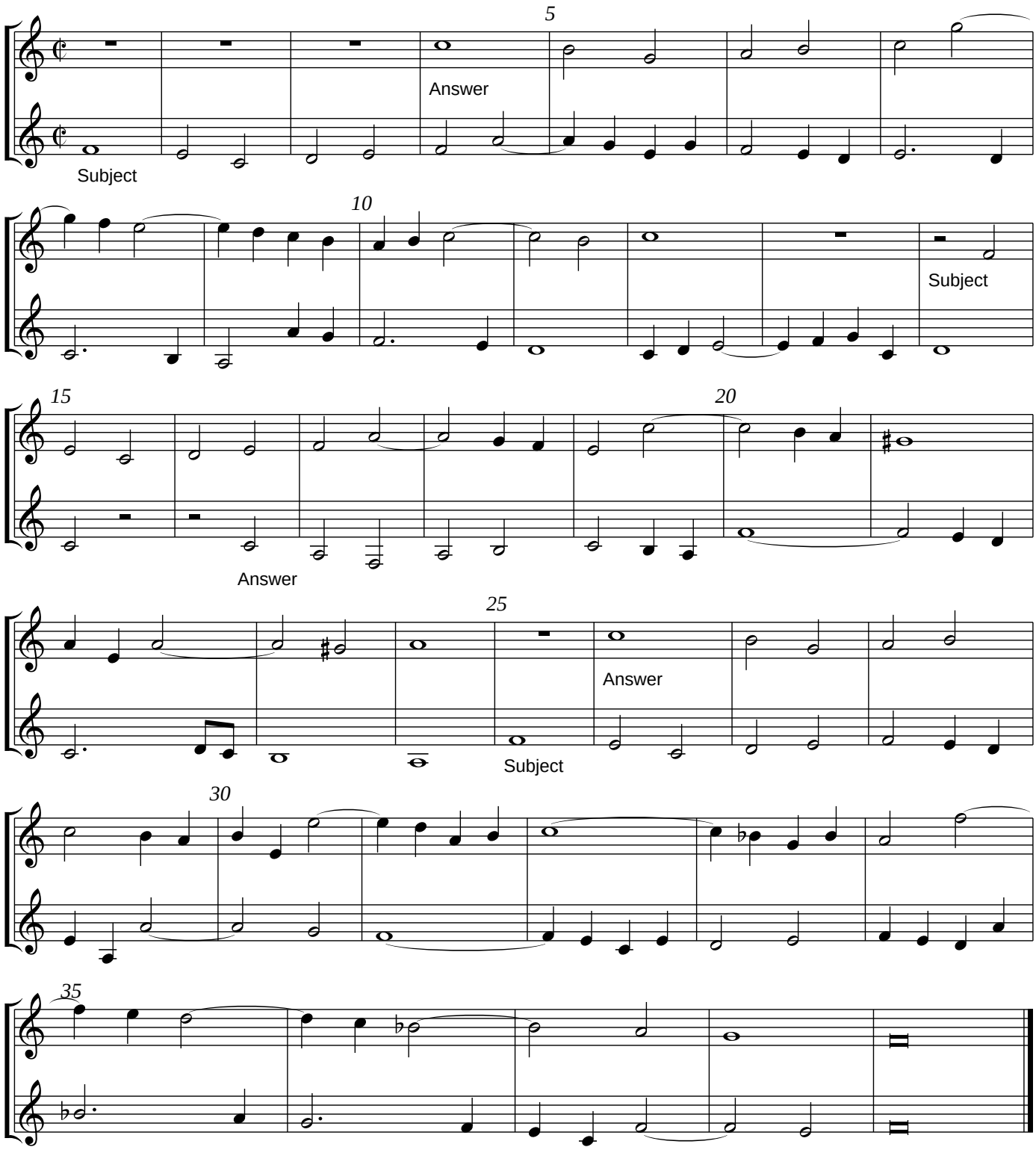
Fugue in D minor

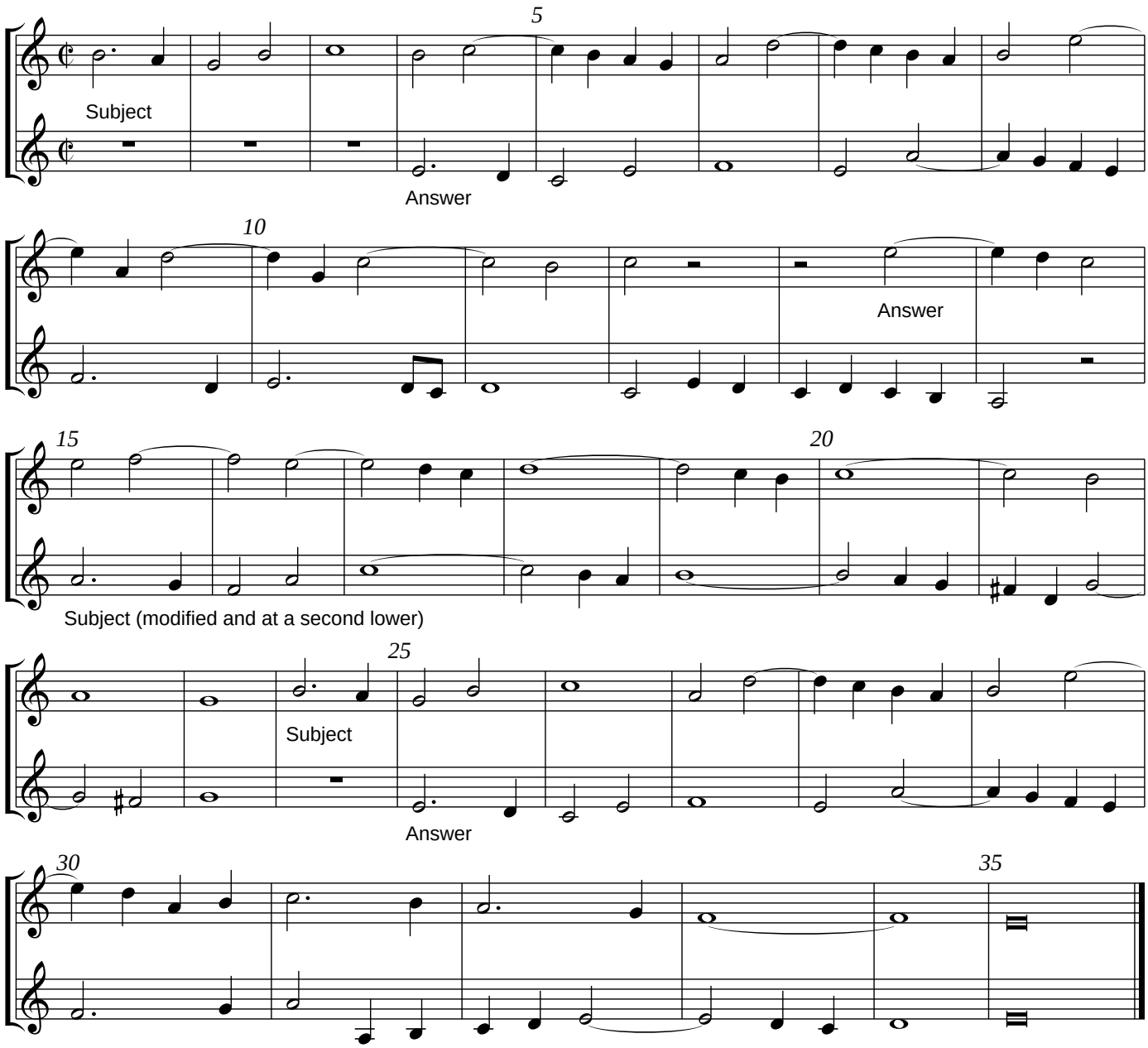
Johann Georg Albrechtsberger (1736 1809)



Fugue in F major

Johann Georg Albrechtsberger (1736 1809)



Fugue E phrygian

Johann Georg Albrechtsberger (1736 1809)