

FOUR CANONS

From *The Musical Offering*

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1747)

Canon comes from the Greek word for rule or law. A musical canon, then, is a piece written according to a governing rule, the simplest of which is well known to every performer of "Three Blind Mice." (For other examples of canons, see pp. 1, 224, 333, 342, and 358.)

The canons below are based on a theme purportedly given to Bach by Frederick the Great as a subject for improvisation. Bach later sent the king a "musical offering" in which the same royal theme served as the basis for an impressive collection of pieces. As no instruments are specified for most of the canons in this work, any well-sounding combination may be used.

The remarkable intellectual achievement in these four examples is not merely that they use canonic devices, but that these devices are controlled by the requirements of the traditional harmonic system. Would writing a canon in an atonal style be an easier task?

1) The rule for this amusing crab canon is indicated by the clef and signatures at the end:

Handwritten note: *Clef →
Bass down an octave
Canon a 2*



10



15



Handwritten note: *Treble clef
at pitch*

