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978-0-521-87074-0 - J. S. Bach: A Life in Music
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J. S. BACH

Peter Williams approaches afresh the life and music of arguably the most studied of all composers, interpreting both Bach's life by deconstructing his original Obituary in the light of more recent information, and his music by evaluating his priorities and irrepressible creative energy. How, even though belonging to musical families on both his parents' sides, did he come to possess so bewitching a sense of rhythm and melody, and a mastery of harmony that established nothing less than a norm in western culture? In considering that the works of a composer are his biography, the book's title *A Life in Music* means both a life spent making music and one revealed in the music as we know it. A distinguished scholar and performer, Williams re-examines Bach's life as an orphan and a family man, as an extraordinarily gifted composer and player, and as an energetic and ambitious artist who never suffered fools gladly.

PETER WILLIAMS held the first Chair in Performance Practice in a British university (Edinburgh) and the first Arts and Sciences Distinguished Chair at Duke University, North Carolina. His books include *The European Organ* (1966), *Bach: The Goldberg Variations* (Cambridge, 2001), *Figured Bass Accompaniment* (1970), *The Organ in Western Culture 750–1250* (Cambridge, 1993), *The Chromatic Fourth During Four Centuries of Music* (1998) and *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge, second edition 2003).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521870740

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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-87074-0 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-87074-7 hardback

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Preface

This approach to the imperfectly known work and life of Johann Sebastian Bach makes particular use of the Obituary (*Nekrolog*) in newly translated excerpts, as a thread leading through the maze of fact and conjecture about him. Presumed to have been drafted in the months following the composer's death and not published until some four years later, it joined two other obituaries in a periodical edited by one of his former Leipzig pupils (see *List of references*). A delay of four years was not uncommon at the time and need not imply faint public interest in its subject, although there does remain a question whether there had been difficulty in getting it published.

Apart from some closing memorial verses in the form of a cantata-text, the Obituary has two main sections, now attributed to two other former pupils: a factual-biographical part by the composer's second surviving son Carl Philipp Emanuel (here 'Emanuel')¹ and a shorter critical-evaluatory part by another former pupil, Johann Friedrich Agricola (here 'Agricola'). I have followed this plan, first expanding the biographical part in Chapters 1 to 7, then the evaluatory part in Chapter 8, and finally adding a brief epilogue and a glossary. In the course of this, questions are raised to which the present book often provides no clear answer, partly because so often one simply does not know, partly because the way a question is framed can imply a possible answer.

Much of what Emanuel reports here and in his later letters must have come from his father either by word of mouth or indirectly from written-down and even published documentation, and suggestions about these different sources are made from time to time. Like any biography the Obituary had an agenda of its own, conveying not only some touching incidents told presumably by the hero-subject himself (while ignoring others less touching) but also the kinds of thing its younger, university-educated

¹ 'Emanuel', as in Burney's *History*. Some more recent English-language authors refer to 'Carl' (probably his name within the family), many German authors to 'Ph. Em.' or 'Carl Ph. Em.', 'K. P. E.', etc.

authors would find important to say about a man whom they understood only in part. In doing this the authors laid a path trodden by his admirers ever since, so that what they say and – often much more important – do not say is a crucial part of the Bach picture.

Since this book can not match or even absorb all the work of the research institutes in Leipzig and Göttingen, it aims to treat his life and music as revealing certain priorities, partly by making comparisons with other music and musicians of the time. On its treatment of the keyboard music, see some remarks in the Epilogue. Bach's life seems so integrated that it becomes difficult to disentangle the creative composer, the career professional, the virtuoso player, the conscientious teacher and the ambitious artist. Accordingly, despite its roughly chronological arrangement the book discusses many a detail of the music in more than one place, with cross reference, each relevant to more than one aspect of the life and work. Book 1 of the Well-tempered Clavier, for example, occurs in the narrative apropos biography (when and why it could have originated), teaching (*vis-à-vis* other books), the exploration of forms (types of composition), 'pure' musical interests (e.g. in the hexachord), and other topics (organization, tuning, instruments, fingering, etc.). The intention is less to give thumbnail sketches of a vast output than to consider what much of it suggests of the composer's preoccupations, in the belief that in this respect, works are biography. The title 'A life in music' therefore indicates not so much 'a life spent in music' as 'a life glimpsed through the music'.

In the text to follow, abbreviations and bracketed references (with name, date and page number) are expanded in the *List of references*, while *qv* indicates an entry in the *Glossary*.

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Acknowledgments

Such a book as this is made possible only by publications of the Bach-Archiv, Leipzig and the Bach-Institut, Göttingen, and in particular I would like to acknowledge the fundamental work of the *Bach-Dokumente* prepared by †Prof Dr Werner Neumann and Prof Dr Hans-Joachim Schulze (four volumes at time of writing), and of the many authoritative contributors over the years to the *Bach-Jahrbuch* and the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*. A list of references at the end of the book makes clear my indebtedness to many secondary sources and certain previous biographies, from Spitta 1873 to Wolff 2000. The book grew from a short volume in the Cambridge University Press series *Musical Lives* (originally suggested by Penny Souster), and has since been patiently supported by Dr Victoria Cooper and Rebecca Jones. For various kindnesses I would like to thank Mr Michael Black (Cambridge), Dr Brian Cookson (Gloucester), Prof Dr Martin Geck (Dortmund), Dr David Wyn Jones (Cardiff), Dr Michael Kube (Tübingen), Dr Raymond Monelle (Edinburgh), Dr David Ponsford (Cirencester), Dr Tushaar Power (Duke University) and Dr Peter Wollny (Leipzig). My former colleague Dr David Humphreys (Cardiff) was unstintingly helpful over the final draft and became the source of many improvements to it.

For setting the music examples I thank most warmly Dr Gerald Hendrie, the first Professor of Music in the Open University, scholar of Handel and Gibbons, composer, organist, and a friend of decades.

The excerpt in Example 1, from the MS LM 4708, appears by kind permission of the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University.

Maps



1 Map of Northern Germany in the time of J. S. Bach



2 Map of Thuringia and Saxony in the time of J. S. Bach