

Bach – A Musical Biography

J. S. Bach composed some of the best-loved and most moving music in Western culture. Surviving mostly in manuscript collections, his music also exists in special and unique publications that reveal much about his life and thoughts as a composer. In this book Peter Williams, author of the acclaimed *J. S. Bach: A Life in Music*, revisits Bach's biography through the lens of his music. Reviewing all of Bach's music chronologically, Williams discusses the music collection by collection to reveal the development of Bach's interests and priorities. While a great deal has been written about the composer's vocal works, Williams gives the keyboard music its proper emphasis, revealing it as crucial to Bach's biography, as a young organist and a mature composer, as a performer in public and teacher in private and as a profound thinker in the language of music.

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Bach

A Musical Biography

PETER WILLIAMS



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Preface

In addition to its size and much fuller content, this book differs from my previous attempts at Bach biography, *A Life of Bach* (2004) and *J. S. Bach: A Life in Music* (2007), in three particular ways. First, it brings the biography more up to date and asks further questions about the agenda of the sources. Secondly, often now with new sections beginning ‘A note on’, it discusses the music to a far greater extent than before, collection by collection. These major sections, placed more or less chronologically, aim not at providing analytical programme-notes but at indicating the composer’s development, interests and priorities at those points. Hence the phrase ‘a musical biography’. Thirdly, the book gives some emphasis to the keyboard music, seeing it as crucial to Bach’s biography, as a young organist and a mature composer, as a performer in public and a teacher in private.

Giving due weight to the keyboard music also has the aim of counterbalancing the constant stream of writings, both scholarly and popular, on Bach’s vocal works. The cantatas (qv), Passions (qv) and Masses, having words, are frequently mined for ideas about ‘Bach’s beliefs’, ‘Bach’s feelings’, ‘Bach’s theology’, etc., and a writer’s enthusiasm comes from delight in those works. They were conceived to instruct, affect, alert, startle and entrance the listener, originally doing so mostly in church services but today anywhere; and they amount to a good half of the composer’s entire surviving output. Yet focusing on them and their expressiveness not only takes music’s meaning for granted (see the final section, ‘A brief note on aesthetics’) but might neglect the composer’s profound consideration of music’s language, how its notes behave and what they can be made to do. This becomes clearest, I believe, in the keyboard music and in works often treated as if of only marginal interest, such as the canons.

The Obituary

Like the earlier versions, this book includes newly translated excerpts from the composer’s Obituary of 1754, now increased in number and used more fully as a thread through the maze of fact and conjecture about him. An

aim of the Obituary too was to give a major emphasis to the composer's keyboard activities. It is about these that its few anecdotes are told at some length, from the first (the confiscated notebook) to the last (playing the piano to the King of Prussia). It appears also to make use of printed reports of Bach's public appearances as a player.

The document now usually called 'Bach's Obituary', or *Nekrolog*, was first entitled a 'Memorial' (*Denkmahl*) and later 'Some Reports and Thoughts' (*Einige Nachrichten und Gedanken*: Forkel 1802). Though 'Memorial' is a more appropriate term, I have kept to 'Obituary' because of its familiarity. I have also followed its very convenient plan of writing about a composer by largely separating off chronological narrative (Part I) from critical observations (Part II). The closing epilogue here corresponds, in a sense, to the Obituary's third section, which was a cantata-text in Bach's honour.

Drafted in the months following his death, ready by March 1751 but not published until some three years later (Dok. III, p. 7), the Obituary joined two other memorials in a musical periodical edited by a former Leipzig student, Lorenz Mizler, who twenty years earlier had dedicated his university dissertation to Bach, among others. (See 'Obituary' in the list of references.) The two other capellmeisters (qv) being honoured by Mizler are less well known now but were significant figures of the time, G. H. Bümler and G. H. Stölzel, members of Mizler's 'Society for Musical Sciences' to which, like Bach, they made musical contributions of one kind or another. A delay of four years for such a memorial as Bach's was not then unusual and need not imply low public interest, for Bümler had died much earlier (1745) and Stölzel also before Bach (1749). Nevertheless, given that someone is being uniquely described as 'world-famous', one wonders whether there had been some difficulty in getting it published or whether it had been written for some other, unrealized purpose.

Each of the Obituary's two sections is attributed in the documentation to a former Bach pupil: the biographical part to the composer's second surviving son Carl Philipp Emanuel (here 'Emanuel'), the evaluatory part to his pupil and Emanuel's colleague in Berlin, Johann Friedrich Agricola (here 'Agricola'). There follow some memorial verses, laid out as a cantata-text and written by Georg Venzky, another member of Mizler's society but closely connected neither with Leipzig nor, it seems, the composer. (The two accompanying obituaries also closed with a cantata-text in homage, but by Mizler.) Like any biography, the Obituary had an agenda, relating some touching incidents told presumably by the hero-subject himself while ignoring others less touching; and it gives details that its university-educated authors would find important about a man they understood only

in part. In effect, they laid a path trodden by his admirers ever since, so that what they say and, especially, do not say has become and still is to this day a crucial part of the Bach picture.

‘A musical biography’

Both the newly enlarged Parts I and II of this book raise many questions to which no one has an answer, although in their wording such questions sometimes imply one answer rather than another.

The observations in Part II would range more widely if I pursued some of the more theoretical aspects, particularly theology and philosophy. But the book’s emphasis is on the musical background, with more references to other composers and repertoires than is the case in many Bach biographies. Despite uncertainties about other music that Bach knew and when he knew it, I feel that such emphasis reveals the activity of a unique musician more intimately than excursions into political history, social history, religion, theology, philosophy, literature, rhetoric, numerology, theatre, dance, architecture, esoteric schemes and even word-setting. Such topics are part of the picture, of course, as they were for many others at the time, and I do not mean to dismiss them casually. But I do feel that what precisely the influence of these topics was on Bach’s music *qua* music is less obvious than modern studies often imply.

Also unimportant for the purposes of this book, except where it impinges on the record, is ‘Bach reception’, how other people posthumously received Bach’s music. More important here is how Bach himself received other people’s music. What he learnt from a variety of repertoires – traditional vocal and keyboard music of the Lutheran organist, classical vocal styles of the old Italian masters (especially Masses), newer Italian trios, Venetian concertos, French *ouvertures* (qv) and *suites*, formal arias, popular songs and especially the best Italian and German keyboard counterpoint – all this gives some idea of his own musical priorities and underlines the breadth of his knowledge. The gradual awareness in recent times of how much Latin music by Roman Catholic composers Bach copied, adapted and prepared for various possible uses has revealed a major activity still far from being fully assessed.

Not only is Bach’s music for keyboard the most widely known of his work but it was by far the most music he ever published, and that in which he could be said to be most alone with his thoughts about music. Although it would be an exaggeration to think that the choral works were important

only to ‘Bach the Salaried Church Cantor’ (qv) and, likewise, that the chamber music was of interest only to ‘Bach the Freelance Secular Composer’, there does seem nevertheless good reason to ‘feel the heart of the man’ at its clearest not in either of these but in keyboard music, ultimately in the Art of Fugue. Whatever his achievements in choral music, a composer who appears to rejoice in the very compass (qv) of the keyboard – I am thinking of the special use he makes of the top d^{'''} in the ‘Goldberg Variations’ or the bottom pedal C in several organ works – is one for whom it was and remained the prime mover. The critic of 1737 who, while admiring Bach’s performing skills, accused him of requiring singers and instrumentalists to do what he could do on the keyboard (Dok. II, p. 286) was not far wrong.

This volume

Although this book places the collections of Bach’s music in roughly chronological order, most of it is referred to in more than one connection. For example, Book 1 of the Well-tempered Clavier (WTC) has its own brief account (‘A note on . . .’) but also crops up in other connections: biography, musical context, making collections, developing harmony, shaping movements, teaching students, tuning harpsichords, playing keyboard. For such scattered references, see the Index of works.

The musical examples are as before, and I have baulked at adding more to demonstrate the scope of this massive oeuvre. To do this fairly would require dozens of additions, presume on the reader’s confidence with notation and also tempt the musician (whose eye leaps to any musical notation on the page) to skip the text. Above all, it would deny the maxim I have always believed, that ‘examples do not prove, they only illustrate’.

The earlier version of this book had a cover reproducing a lively Viennese court-scene in c. 1760, showing an instrumental ensemble of musicians in bright uniform playing to a well-dressed but inattentive throng. This was to get away from the usual dour image of Bach conveyed by the official portrait (which followed portrait-conventions of the time and place) and to show a court-scene not so very different from any that he knew in Dresden or Berlin, or even in Cöthen and Weimar except in scale. Hapsburg and Wettin-Albertine banquets were grander, no doubt. For the cover of the present edition, the view of a room in Frederick the Great’s Sanssouci Palace is meant to suggest various things typical of the day: the royal or aristocratic settings for a great deal of chamber music, including

Bach's; the increasingly 'high profile' enjoyed by keyboard-players in public; the styles of architecture and furnishings familiar to the composer; and in all respects, a world quite distinct from church. From the familiar engravings of the Lutheran towns and churches of Leipzig and Eisenach, it is not easy to envisage how cosmopolitan were Bach's interests as a musician and how varied his experiences.

Abbreviations and bracketed references (name, date and page-number) are expanded in the list of references, while (qv) refers to an entry in the glossary. The separate movements of a work are identified by small Roman numerals, for example BWV 196.iv and BWV 769.x. Keys are usually spelt out but for brevity are sometimes written as C (major) and c (minor). Original work-titles are left italicized in German (e.g. *Clavierübung*) or left plain in English translation (e.g. St Matthew Passion) but put in quotation marks when the title is not (or not known) to be the composer's own, as in 'Mass in B minor'. This should also be the case for the usual titles 'Cantata No. 1', 'Cantata No. 215', etc., neither the title nor number of which is Bach's, but for which it would be otiose to use quotation marks each time.

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



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