More than any other part of his output, the Bach keyboard works conveyed to generations of admirers the essence of his inimitable art. Their varied responses to this repertoire – in scholarly and more popular kinds of writing, public lectures, musical composition and transcription, pedagogical programs, performances, and in editions – ensured its survival and broadened its creator’s appeal. The early reception of this music also continues to affect how we understand and value it, though we rarely recognize that historical continuity. Organized around key episodes in the reception of Bach’s keyboard works from his own day to the middle of the nineteenth century, Engaging Bach shows how his remarkable and long-lasting legacy took shape amid epochal changes in European musical thought and practice.

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ENGAGING BACH

The Keyboard Legacy from Marpurg to Mendelssohn

MATTHEW DIRST

University of Houston
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Preface

What makes the music of Johann Sebastian Bach so endlessly fascinating? Answers to that question typically begin by acknowledging its incredible capacity to engage listeners on multiple levels, from the most esoteric of intellectual games to the deepest kind of emotional experience. Ultimately, the value of any music depends on both what we hear and how we choose to think about it. In his own day Bach’s most enthusiastic admirers were convinced that he had perfected the art of composition, while others found his works unduly complex and difficult. The former notion remained a powerful rallying cry for his heirs and followers, who used it to raise interest in certain parts of his output (with varying degrees of success) during the hundred years or so between Bach’s death in 1750 and the middle of the nineteenth century. As various individuals and communities came to know his keyboard works especially, a multifaceted legacy took shape, one whose influence has been pervasive and long-lasting. This book examines some of the most crucial episodes in that larger story, with an eye towards discerning for each the particular appeal of this music for those who engaged seriously with it.

Readers, especially those who know this repertoire well, may wonder whether such things are of more than just historical or academic interest. In the pages that follow, I have tried wherever possible to relate past thinking about Bach and his keyboard works to ideas that are still widely shared among professionals and laymen alike and are seldom pondered, much less challenged. Without giving away too much here, I will affirm that the study of an art work’s (or an entire repertoire’s) reception provides valuable perspective – on the many potential ways of understanding, interpreting, and taking inspiration from it – by identifying what has made and what continues to endow it with unique appeal. This kind of inquiry reminds us, in other words, why a particular cultural artifact retains its allure; we learn simultaneously about history and about ourselves, a process that can be both interesting and humbling.

Though it is difficult to imagine the western musical tradition without Bach’s four-part chorales or The Well-Tempered Clavier, there was a time when these iconic works were known only to a select few. In one of the earliest studies of Bach’s historical legacy, Friedrich Blume characterized...
Preface

posthumous reception of his music with the help of a familiar double entendre: knowing that German readers could read “Bach” and think “brook” or “stream” (its other meanings in that language), Blume observed that “the rivulets through which a limited and modest Bach tradition flowed after his death were very narrow.”

This bucolic image, with its suggestion that the composer’s essence continued to percolate quietly through music history until the great public watershed of the nineteenth-century Bach “Revival,” has been transformed by a wealth of detail about the dissemination of sources, production of editions, performance traditions, widespread influence, and ever-expanding reach of Bach’s music during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Adding modestly to that documentary history, this book highlights the diversity of engagement with his keyboard works during that time. Individual chapters explore related questions: Why were these works crucial to Bach’s historical legacy? What impact did they have on their respective genres? What lessons did they convey to composers and to other students of the art? Who played this music and why? How did successive generations and different national communities interpret and perform it? As even a casual glance at the table of contents will show, I have not tried to be comprehensive, even for the period in question; instead, I have focused on those aspects of reception that I have found to be most instructive or illuminating.

For encouraging my interest in music from an early age and my curiosity about Bach in particular, I dedicate this book to my parents, Loretta and Charles Dirst. Crucial support for this project came from a Research Initiative Grant and a Faculty Development Leave from the University of Houston. I am indebted to Cambridge University Press series editors Laurence Dreyfus and John Butt for their insightful assessments of multiple drafts, and to Penny Souster, Rebecca Taylor, and Victoria Cooper for their editorial assistance and extraordinary patience. Individual chapters have benefited from the advice and criticism of numerous individuals, including Karol Berger, David Ferris, Thomas Grey, Joshua Rifkin, Susan Scarrow, David Schulenberg, Yo Tomita, Sixto Wagan, and the collective wisdom of the Cambridge (MA) Bach Colloquium. My thanks go also to Jeffrey Ragsdale for realizing the musical examples and to Katie Buehner for assistance with bibliographic and technical matters. All translations, unless otherwise credited in the notes, are my own.

### Abbreviations

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AMZ</td>
<td><em>Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung</em> (Leipzig, 1798–1848)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BJ</td>
<td><em>Bach Jahrbuch</em> (Leipzig, 1904–)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KB</td>
<td>Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Institut Göttingen and the Bach-Archiv Leipzig, eds., <em>Kritischer Bericht to the Neue Bach Ausgabe</em> (Kassel and Basle, 1954–)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCM</td>
<td>Royal College of Music, London</td>
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<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td><em>The Well-Tempered Clavier</em></td>
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