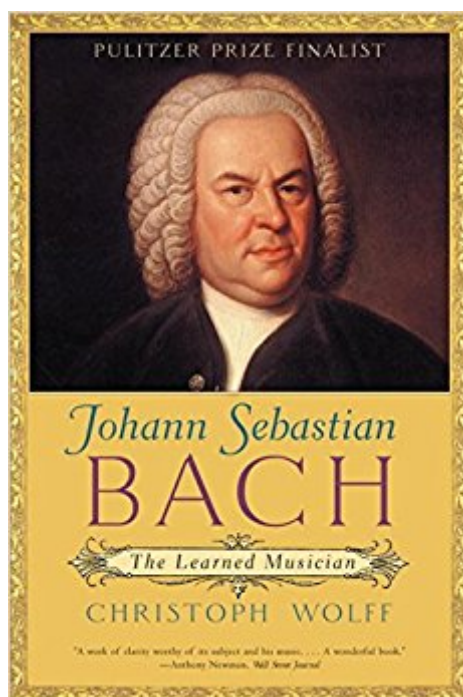


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Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician



Synopsis

Finalist for the 2001 Pulitzer Prize in Biography, this landmark book was revised in 2013 to include new knowledge discovered after its initial publication. Although we have heard the music of J. S. Bach in countless performances and recordings, the composer himself still comes across only as an enigmatic figure in a single familiar portrait. As we mark the 250th anniversary of Bach's death, author Christoph Wolff presents a new picture that brings to life this towering figure of the Baroque era. This engaging new biography portrays Bach as the living, breathing, and sometimes imperfect human being that he was, while bringing to bear all the advances of the last half-century of Bach scholarship. Wolff demonstrates the intimate connection between the composer's life and his music, showing how Bach's superb inventiveness pervaded his career as musician, composer, performer, scholar, and teacher. And throughout, we see Bach in the broader context of his time: its institutions, traditions, and influences. With this highly readable book, Wolff sets a new standard for Bach biography. 42 black and white illustrations

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Customer Reviews

This book is most ostensibly not a work intended to provide a layman's knowledge of Bach. The book assumes a fair knowledge of Bach and his oeuvre, as well as a thorough knowledge of music theory and general instrumentation. Cristoph Wolff has written a thoroughly satisfying and extraordinarily comprehensive summary of Bach's professional and personal lives. I found that despite the book's intrinsically serious tone, reading it as a whole felt not like a biography, but a

story that us Bach fanatics wish would never end. This book is thoroughly impressive in both its scope and its detail, though the numerous tables cataloguing Bach's work from the various periods such as Weimar and Cothen are not as well integrated in text as one might hope. Where Wolff makes the occasional reference to the tables, I as the reader desired to see more comparison and analysis of various works in each period. It is also immediately apparent upon even a glance through the index that Wolff dedicates much of his analysis of Bach's major works to Bach's vocal music, and notably less space to Bach's instrumental and keyboard/organ music. As we know, Bach's Fugue "the Great" in G minor, BWV 542, is a towering masterpiece of Bach's (and Baroque) organ music, but Wolff hardly affords it the analysis it demands. He also neglects to develop much depth of analysis with Bach's instrumental works. For example, we know that nearly all of Bach's solo and multiple piano concerti have their roots in previous concerti, but little attention is paid as to why Bach chose to transcribe to piano (harpsichord), why he selected the works he did, and whether there is a distinct method/pattern to Bach's transcriptions.

...I'll get my one major quibble out of the way immediately - you'll only get the best out of it if you have some musical knowledge, and I have only a little. Without some comprehension of his or her art, the life of a great artist, especially one untainted by scandals or crises, is in danger of becoming just a procession of dates, names and places. The whole appeal of J.S. Bach is bound up in his extraordinary musicianship, first as virtuoso keyboard player, then as composer of many different forms. It seems to me that, if you don't grasp this extraordinary art, you don't really grasp Bach. Professor Wolff naturally grasps it. He is a professor of music and director of the Bach-Archiv in Leipzig. He speaks learnedly and enthusiastically of "ritornellos" and the "Oberwerk" and "Brustpositiv" of an organ and the daring dissonance in BWV38 as a result of a third-inversion dominant-seventh chord, while the musically uneducated among us (such as myself) wonder, "What's THAT?" And of course his musical examples at the end are lost on us. Professor Wolff has sought to bring Johann Sebastian Bach to us, and has succeeded very well, but he is handicapped not by his inabilities, but by ours. Nevertheless, I think he could have done slightly better for those of us who love Bach but who lack his musical erudition - perhaps a glossary of the musical terms used therein, even a rudimentary explanation of some of the technicalities behind this extraordinary music, would have helped the reader (this one anyway) feel less at sea in parts. OK, this is not a "baroque music for dummies" book, but such additions would have helped.

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