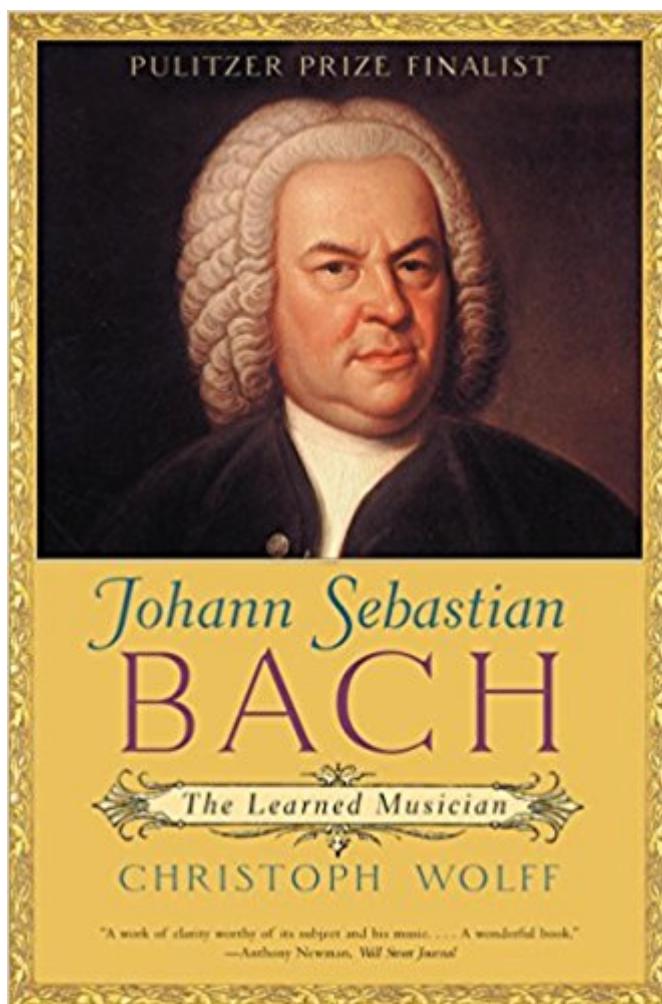


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Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician (Norton Paperback)



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.

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Customer Reviews

I just finished reading this book - loved it. I have, of late, fallen in love with classical music. It's all I

listen to in the car and at work. I felt it was time to learn more about one of my favorite composers, and this book was great. Facts I found most interesting: Bach came from a family of talented and respected musicians. He was an incredibly talented and respected organist. Churches would have him come to examine and inspect their newly built organs. (Makes his organ compositions more interesting) He had 20 children (from two wives - the first died suddenly of illness) 10 made it to adulthood. While living in Leipzig his family lived in a large home by the time's standards - 803 square feet! Much of Bach's work was lost after his death. He divided his manuscripts among his four musical children, and only Carl Philipp Emanuel managed his inherited music with care - the others sold theirs piecemeal. I am completely un-educated when it comes to the technical side of the music, so a lot of the discussion of the music itself went over my head. Still, I enjoyed the book immensely.

Wolff certainly has done the research and then written a passionate account of this "learned musician" for the ages. Among the fine qualities of this biography is a clear, concise writing style with erudite thinking demonstrated sorting out the historical sources surrounding Bach's life. Tracing his life chronologically, the book's theme is one of a composer/virtuoso/organ expert who develops out of self-interest and passion for music and especially his family background of musicians. He certainly had some ins because of this family heritage, but certainly on the same hand earned his way by his demonstrated abilities on the organ, pipe organ construction and maintenance and finally composition. Revolutionizing the music craft by his counterpoint and harmonization, his influence both to those who come after him including his two older sons, this man continues to play vital role in unfolding world of music. Minor missing element which certainly is understandable for the non-theologically inclined is the major influence that Bach's theology played in his music. From the surviving Cavlov Bible that we have from J.S., we know this as certainty.

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. Christoph 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 Cöthen 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. Wolff does do, however, an exquisite job of analysis of Bach's vocal music, exploring the depth of Bach's passion for writing cantatas, and how skillfully he was able to interpret his vision of the words into music. Wolff provides numerous glimpses of Bach's organ expertise, especially in the field of repair and construction. These descriptions do require some prior knowledge of how an organ produces sound and how it is played in order to be enjoyed to the fullest. The book also does a magnificent job of exploring and relating the various and primary influences on Bach's musical development and style. Wolff provides an insight into the influence of Dietrich Buxtehude especially, as well as that of Johann Pachelbel and the numerous older Bach relations. Much has been heaped upon Mozart's child prodigy fame, but even those of us for whom Bach is a perpetual favorite, know little about Bach's formative years, and Wolff gives a very comprehensive look at Bach's musical training. Wolff's small digressions notwithstanding, this book is truly one every lover of Bach should keep in his library. (And reread every so often!)

This is my first review ever, but I'm hoping if enough voices are added to the outcry something might be done. So I only need echo what has already been said: the book is fantastic, the most human portrait of Bach that I've encountered; the Kindle edition is shameful. How dare they publish a biography of Bach and not include musical examples? And then charge \$14 for it? I have other Kindle books about music that include the musical examples, so clearly it's possible; they just wanted to do this on the cheap. There is also no index, which should be relatively easy to include, and the text is replete with typos. I'm going to have to buy a hard copy in order to get any use out of this book, besides just reading it through...which I STILL enjoyed, because it is SO good.

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