



Bach: Essays on His Life and Music

By Christoph Wolff

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Johann Sebastian Bach holds a singular position in the history of music. A uniquely gifted musician, he combined outstanding performing virtuosity with supreme creative powers and remarkable intellectual discipline. More than two centuries after his lifetime, Bach's work continues to set musical standards.

The noted Bach scholar Christoph Wolff offers in this book new perspectives on the composer's life and remarkable career. Uncovering important historical evidence, the author demonstrates significant influences on Bach's artistic development and brings fresh insight on his work habits, compositional intent, and the musical traditions that shaped Bach's thought. Wolff reveals a composer devoted to an ambitious and highly individual creative approach, one characterized by constant self-criticism and self-challenge, the absorption of new skills and techniques, and the rethinking of riches from the musical past.

Readers will find illuminating analyses of some of Bach's greatest music, including the B Minor Mass, important cantatas, keyboard and chamber compositions, the Musical Offering, and the Art of Fugue. Discussion of how these pieces "work" will be helpful to performers--singers, players, conductors--and to everyone interested in exploring the conceptual and contextual aspects of Bach's music. All readers will find especially interesting those essays in which Wolff elaborates on his celebrated discoveries of previously unknown works: notably the fourteen "Goldberg" canons and a collection of thirty-three chorale preludes.

Representing twenty-five years of scholarship, these essays--half of which appear here in English for the first time--have established Christoph Wolff as one of the world's preeminent authorities on J. S. Bach. All students, performers, and lovers of Bach's music will find this an engaging and enlightening book.

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Bach: Essays on His Life and Music By Christoph Wolff Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1632237 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Harvard University Press
- Published on: 1994-01-01
- Released on: 1994-01-31
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 10.00" h x 1.19" w x 7.00" l, 1.88 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 480 pages

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Bach's life and work has been of interest to musicians and scholars for over 200 years. This collection of essays by Wolff (*The New Grove Bach Family* , Norton, 1983) illuminates aspects of Bach's life through his music. Written over a 25-year period, the essays are documented in an extensive bibliography and have been updated with postscripts when necessary. Whenever possible, Wolff has gone directly to Bach's manuscripts to form his theses. For example, the question of the final "unfinished" fugue in the "Art of the Fugue" is resolved by notes in Bach's own hand that were revealed by infra-red photography. The book is illustrated with facsimiles, tables, and musical examples. Although it contains considerable technical material, it is largely accessible to the knowledgeable layperson and will be welcomed by serious students and performers. Essential for music libraries and a valuable addition to larger serious music collections.

- *Sherry Feintuch, Dauphin Cty . Lib. System, Harrisburg, Pa.*

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Review

What there is to know about Bach, Christoph Wolff knows. And everything Wolff...knows about Bach's life, he has poured into this new and magisterial biographical portrait...[*Bach*] is user-friendly, helpful, and entertainingly informative. Direct and illuminating commentary on Bach's major works, and on the major musical issues that Bach confronted, fill the book...[Wolff's] main text surrounds the facts of Bach's life with an invaluable sense of context--additional facts about musical life, courts, patronage, church doctrine, ecclesiastical and municipal politics...Wolff has provided every lover of Bach with a book to learn from. (Richard Dyer *Boston Globe*)

This volume will be useful not only to conductors, performers, and scholars, but to other listeners, myself included, who will be stimulated by it to find ever deeper levels of meaning in Bach's many-splendored genius...Christoph Wolff functions here as a philologist and palaeographer deciphering a complex manuscript, as a biographer contemplating the mysteries of continuity and change in the composer's long and productive career, as a demythologizer reviewing the legends about Bach with which we all grew up, as a social and intellectual historian placing the musical oeuvre into its total context, as a sensitive listener who even after all these years of research has not lost the capacity to hear and admire the miracle that is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. (Jaroslav Pelikan, Sterling Professor of History, Yale University, author of *Bach Among the Theologians*)

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