

HAROLD FROMM

J. S. Bach in the Twenty-First Century: The Chapel Becomes a Larder

Bach is sometimes referred to as the father of Western music, not to suggest that there was nothing of substance before him (he didn't spring full grown from the head of Zeus) but that the music after him has been profoundly influenced and shaped by his models. And surely the influences have been radical and vast, whether on the finale of Mozart's "Jupiter" symphony or the *Grosse Fuge* of Beethoven or the organ music of Mendelssohn or the *Bachianas Brasileiras* of Villa Lobos or (to acknowledge the present moment) *La Pasión según San Marcos* of Osvaldo Golijov. Who else could be the father of Western music? Bach is in the very chemistry of Western musical blood, like red cells, white cells, and platelets in our material plasma.

But if Bach is The Father, why hasn't he fired the popular imagination? We have soppy movies about Mozart and Beethoven as well as proliferating biographies for the intelligent general reader, but nothing really comparable for Bach. If we sample the outpouring since the year 2000, the 250th anniversary of Bach's death, the "life and works" biographies are nothing if not weighty and serious, but these essentially scholarly volumes by Martin Geck, Christoph Wolff, and Peter Williams,¹ despite their generalist pretensions, are hardly readable by nonspecialists. We have fairly localizable "feelings" about Mozart because the personal letters producing those feelings are voluminous. We learn about Wolfgang as a circus freak driven by father Leopold, about the Mozart family's obsession with "shit," about Wolfgang's castigation of Constanze for exposing her ankles, not to mention purported mysteries surrounding the uncompleted Requiem, perfect grist for the mills of pop culture. For Beethoven, again,

¹ JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: Life and Work, by *Martin Geck*. Foreword by *Kurt Masur*. Trans. by *John Hargraves*. Harcourt. \$40.00. J. S. BACH: A Life in Music, by *Peter Williams*. Cambridge University Press. \$40.00. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York, London, 2000).

many autograph materials providing insights into his “spiritual development” (to use the subtitle of an early biography) and his medical problems, his patrons, his financial independence, his nephew, his deafness, his “immortal beloved.” But what is the feel we get from Bach? In fact, who is this seemingly generic father and why has he failed to solidify as part of our cultural ethos? When we hear “Mozart” or “Beethoven,” we think of a person behind the music. When we hear “Bach,” we think of music only.

This turns out to be an eminently answerable question. Letters (in the usual sense of the word) in Bach’s hand are close to non-existent, whether because he wrote very few or his recipients did not save them. There is little or no knowledge of Bach’s interior life, his relation to his parents or siblings, to his two wives, to his twenty children, or his professional outlook as seen by Bach himself. There are a few letters to an old school friend, but almost every other autograph document is a public statement, written to a church administration, a ducal or royal court, or a municipality, and retained as a record by the institutions in question (for our later enlightenment). As a result, the little firsthand information we have is skewed in favor of a picture of Bach as involved in a narrow range of day-to-day problems. Or as Peter Williams puts it in passing, “It could be that the frequency with which money and pay crop up in connection with him is a misleading consequence of his being represented today chiefly by formal documents and business letters.” This fact can hardly be overstated, because the picture derived from such constricting paucity is of an aggressive businessman whining about maltreatment and underpayment, whereas in fact he lived an astounding professional life with plenty of recognition, at least in Germany, if not quite as much or as widespread as Handel or Telemann in their own time.

Most of the actual data we have about Bach was provided by contemporaries or post-contemporaries writing about some particular aspect of his life: a few of his children; his composition, harpsichord, and organ students; newspaper reporters; official recorders of births, marriages and deaths; letters between other people, sometimes composers, commenting on Bach’s music. The most definitive intentional account of Bach’s life soon after his death in 1750 was written four years later by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel (himself becoming a distinguished composer) in conjunction with one of Bach’s students, Johann Friedrich

Agricola. This “Obituary,” as it is generally referred to, while a starting point for most later biographies, is not completely trusted for accuracy. In fact, Peter Williams in his somewhat offbeat *J. S. Bach: A Life in Music*, the most recent learned account, uses sentences from the “Obituary” as chapter heads, which then become the basis for Williams’ own commentary, in the course of which he quarrels with Emanuel Bach about imprecise, sloppy data and faulty memory.

Given the sparseness of solid information, how has it been possible for scholars to write five- to six-hundred-page books one after another about Bach’s life and works, books that I hesitate to refer to as biographies in view of the phantasmal presence of their subject? Of course, the same question has been asked about biographies of Shakespeare, about whom there is even less solid information, which nonetheless has never stopped the Shakespeare Industry from producing more. In the case of Bach, if there is little primary information, there is a good deal of circumstantial information and most of it is collected in four German volumes known for short as the *Bach-Dokumente*, published in Germany gradually from 1963–79, a magic cornucopia for Bach scholars and biographers. Derived from this archive but more accessible to English-language specialists and nonspecialists alike is the brilliant compendium known as *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*,² an inexpensive 1998 update by Christoph Wolff of the original *Bach Reader* of 1945 produced by Hans David and Arthur Mendel. Looking through this richly informative book, one gets a clear picture of where all the basic Bach information has really come from and of what it actually consists.

Although Bach was born in 1685, by 1700 he was already involved in a serious musical career. *The New Bach Reader* provides church records from his birthplace in Eisenach pertaining to his baptism, the death of his mother, his father’s remarriage, and his father’s death, all from the first ten years. From student registers of 1693–5 we know about Bach’s attendance at the Latin School in Eisenach. As Bach moves to Lüneburg and Weimar after living in Ohrdruf with his parent-surrogate brother Johann Christoph we learn about his first jobs, starting as a “lackey” (a titular term for a sort of general musical factotum), though by 1703 there is a

² New York, London, 1998.