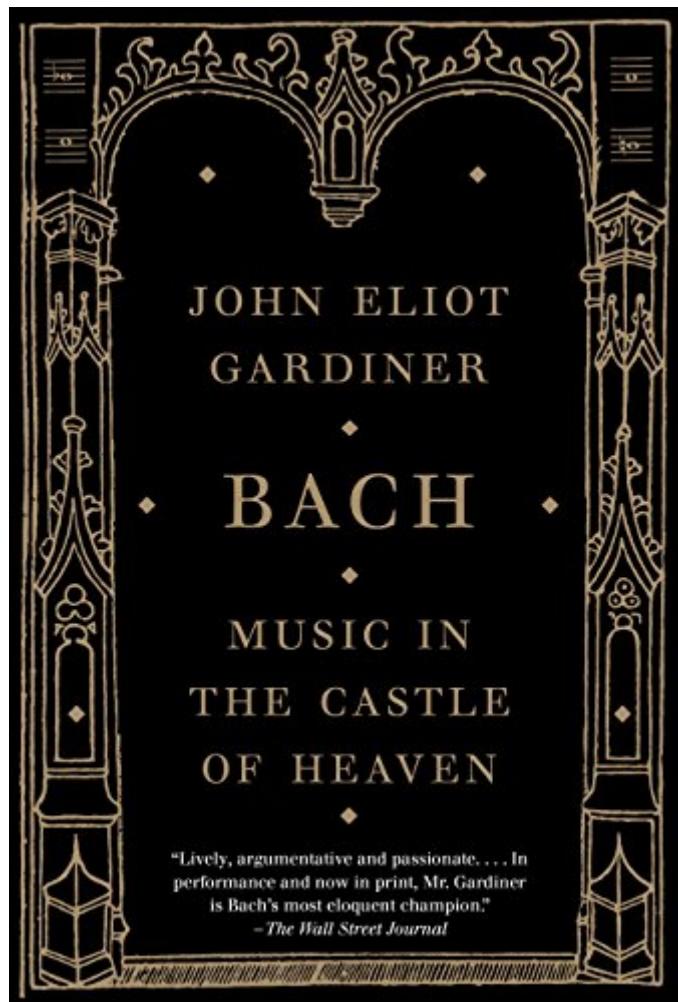


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Bach: Music In The Castle Of Heaven



Synopsis

Johann Sebastian Bach is one of the most unfathomable composers in the history of music. How can such sublime work have been produced by a man who (when we can discern his personality at all) seems so ordinary, so opaque— and occasionally so intemperate? John Eliot Gardiner grew up passing one of the only two authentic portraits of Bach every morning and evening on the stairs of his parents' house, where it hung for safety during World War II. He has been studying and performing Bach ever since, and is now regarded as one of the composer's greatest living interpreters. The fruits of this lifetime's immersion are distilled in this remarkable book, grounded in the most recent Bach scholarship but moving far beyond it, and explaining in wonderful detail the ideas on which Bach drew, how he worked, how his music is constructed, how it achieves its effects—and what it can tell us about Bach the man. Gardiner's background as a historian has encouraged him to search for ways in which scholarship and performance can cooperate and fruitfully coalesce. This has entailed piecing together the few biographical shards, scrutinizing the music, and watching for those instances when Bach's personality seems to penetrate the fabric of his notation. Gardiner's aim is “to give the reader a sense of inhabiting the same experiences and sensations that Bach might have had in the act of music-making. This, I try to show, can help us arrive at a more human likeness discernible in the closely related processes of composing and performing his music.” It is very rare that such an accomplished performer of music should also be a considerable writer and thinker about it. John Eliot Gardiner takes us as deeply into Bach's works and mind as perhaps words can. The result is a unique book about one of the greatest of all creative artists. Â

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Customer Reviews

This is, and I am sure it will continue to be, one of the most interesting, well researched and valuable of books written on J.S. Bach and his times to date. I began it the day it arrived and have barely put it down. That is saying a lot as I have been buying and listening to and reading about Bach for the past 50+ years. Just a quarter of the way into its more than 600 pages, I can report that this book should prove to be invaluable to anyone interested in Bach, the Baroque, and the musicians of that era and before. It is Gardiner's clear and compelling writing, the depth of his research, and his emphasis on Bach's life that is so very compelling. Who was Bach? Why was he that way? And how did his life shape his music? Answering these questions are the objectives of the book. He does it better than anyone I have read. There is much new information discovered only in the last decade or more. I will revise this review when I've finished reading, but I wanted to send a dispatch that in the first four chapters, this is proving to be a wonderful and instructive read. And a last note: the footnotes are terrific.

I do not mean to derogate from Sir John Eliot Gardiner's status as one of the great luminaries of the podium in our age--to say nothing of his status as a pioneer and perfecter of period performance practice--but in the end the capstone of his career might well turn out to have been in the medium of prose rather than musical performance! This is, quite simply, the most fascinating, engrossing, erudite and stunningly written work on the Leipzig Cantor available. Too bad it focuses primarily on his sacred music (I would love to have Gardiner's obiter dicta on many of the keyboard, chamber and orchestral works treated only tangentially here); but within that limited scope, Gardiner has achieved something quite remarkable: a work of musical historiography that manages to combine rigorous scholarship with philosophical acumen and literary flair. As a philosopher with a keen interest in the interface between aesthetics and religion, I particularly appreciated Gardiner's thorough understanding of the exigencies of church music within the Lutheran tradition, and his situating of that tradition within the larger framework of Church history, scriptural exegesis and

Christian spirituality. His effort to discern Bach's character and aspirations from his church music rather than principally from the documentary evidence (which is relatively meager) fixes the reader's (and listener's) attention where it must always begin and end--namely, with the scores themselves, as performed and heard. His charting of Bach's creative development, through the seasons and struggles of his career calls our attention anew to the status of the sacred music--particularly the Cantatas--as a kind of spiritual journal recounting the consolations and desolations of a fragile, fallible genius who also happened to be something of a mystic. For Gardiner, in the end, Bach's sacred-musical testament amounts to the bravest and most brilliant of stands against the depredations of our human condition at its most terrifying--and *for* the transcendence to the rapture of creativity fitfully but effectually points. I cannot recommend this work highly enough. Its pages will afford a fresh encounter with the composer, even if you have been studying his works and his commentators (as I have) for nearly a lifetime. But even more tellingly perhaps, you will encounter John Eliot Gardiner in a new way--as an accomplished writer and winsomely humane scholar.

Little is known of specific events in Bach's personal life, so this book is in part a work of inference and conjecture from limited sources. However, the reconstruction is very honest, data-driven, and rigorous, and resists the temptation to fill in blanks just to build a nice story. The author, conductor John Eliot Gardiner, is one of the main experts in Bach's choral work, and the book focuses on those aspects of the composer's production. Gardiner is also a good historian and an engaging story teller. He has an enormously broad and deep knowledge of history, culture, and music, and paints a compelling picture of Germany in Bach's time as a backdrop for the more personal aspects of this biography and for the musical aspects of some of Bach's best pieces. The first four chapters can be read as a regular book. Once you get to chapter 5, it's best to listen to the cantatas and other pieces discussed in the book before reading, because their discussion is specific and detailed. Bach's music is intimately tied to the lyrics, so reading those (in German if you can) is useful as well. You do not need to know musical theory or notation to understand the book, though: This book is for everyone who is interested in Bach, and is very readable. Once I encounter a new piece in my reading, I stop to download the music (directed by Gardiner when available) from iTunes, read the text of the piece from the web while listening, and then continue reading the book. I find this experience fulfilling, uplifting, and tremendously enjoyable.

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