

Peter Williams, *Bach: A Musical Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). ISBN 978-1-107-13925-1. Pp. xv + 704.

Peter Williams, who died on the eve of Bach's birthday (March 21) 2016, wrote on many subjects but especially on organs, their music, and J. S. Bach. He published three biographies of Bach, each longer and wider-ranging than the last. Each begins with a quotation from the obituary ("The Obituary," to Bach scholars) that was prepared chiefly by Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel. Williams then offers commentary on that and further extracts from the same source. *The Life of Bach*, published in 2004, was a concise volume in Cambridge University Press's "Musical Lives" series. *J. S. Bach: A Life in Music*, which appeared from the same publisher three years later, was roughly twice the size. It added music examples, and to the seven original biographical chapters—ordered chronologically, roughly one per decade—it appended one additional chapter of "observations, descriptions, criticisms," plus an epilog.

The present book, whose proofreading Williams reportedly completed during his last hours, is again twice the size of the previous one. The epilog is now a ninth numbered chapter, comprising, with chapter 8, "Part 2: Observations on the life and works." The latter comments on familiar themes: Bach the teacher, Bach the organist, Friedemann Bach's Little Keyboard Book. It is thus a commentary on Part 1 ("Life and works"), just as the book as a whole remains, in principle, a commentary on the Obituary. Of course even the first book was more than that. In his preface to the second book, Williams explained the seven main chapters as "expanding" the Obituary's biographical section, the final chapter doing the same for the "evaluatory" part of the Obituary (by Johann Friedrich Agricola, Emanuel's fellow pupil of Sebastian). Now, in the preface to the third book, Williams describes his previous "attempts at Bach biography" as "earlier versions" of the present work, which, he writes, differs not only in being more up to date but in devoting greater attention to the music, especially compositions for keyboard (p. ix).

This is an accurate description as far as it goes. No one has surpassed Williams's knowledge of and sympathy for the composer, his music, and the historical and culture milieu from which both emerged. Had he more time, Williams might have written a shorter book. Occasional small redundancies are not a serious problem—rather like variations on certain themes—but the book is impractical for the first-time Bach student; it is too long, too concerned with certain biographical minutiae, and assumes too much knowledge of Bach's music (and many other things) on the part of the reader. There is a glossary, but anyone who needs to use it more than occasionally must be insufficiently familiar with too many things to profit from the book, although the idiosyncratic character of many entries makes them worth reading for their own sake (as in the definition of *a cappella* which begins "an ill-founded term," p. 645, or on "sequence," where we learn: "Continuing a sequence beyond a certain point is a risk not always avoided by Vivaldi," p. 653.)

As one who was, for a brief time, a colleague of Williams at Duke University and was deeply influenced by his writings, I must acknowledge a profound debt to him both personally and professionally. At the end of his review of one of my own publications, he wrote:

the book is rather long and its prose style more conciliatory than it need be. I could imagine eventually a revised version, succinct and subtle, mirroring the same kind of development registered by the composer himself between, say, the G major Toccata and

the prelude to the Fifth Partita, or (over a longer period) the long Weimar fugues and the opening contrapunctus of the *Art of Fugue*.

Nothing by Williams could be considered “conciliatory,” and his Bach book has not evolved in the way he imagined mine might have done. It is, however, the author’s swan song, a final summing up, in that sense resembling the *Art of Fugue* as a whole, if not its first movement.

Relf Clark, reviewing the book’s first incarnation, noted in the *Journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies* (vol. 29 [2005], p. 201): “The problem facing a Bach biographer is that the life and music were practically the same.” That is, there are not many really interesting events in Bach’s life apart from his composition or performance of particular pieces. Admitting as much, in version 2 Williams explained that “the title *A life in music* . . . indicates not so much ‘a life spent in music’ as ‘a life glimpsed through the music’” (p. ix). This is even truer of the biography’s final version, which is “musical” because so much of it is actually about music.

Williams’s Bach is not a single finite personage, which could be only fictional, but rather any number of historical possibilities. For instance, while considering Bach’s manuscript copy of Grigny’s organ book, with its distinctive layout, he writes: “it would not be surprising if . . . Bach also had an interest in musical notation itself” (p. 516). Of course Bach might or he might not have cared about notation as such, but the reader is invited to imagine the hypothesis. Because the documentation needed to prove the latter does not exist, the point seems to be to impel the reader to ask questions about Bach (or his music) rarely imagined by previous biographers—in the process challenging assumptions that are equally hypothetical but which have been accepted by other writers and by the public. Williams is less interested than other Bach scholars in the details of Bach’s actual “music-writing process,” which, as investigated by some musicologists, has been a matter of how he literally set ink down on paper. Williams, whose interests extended to the varieties of wood and metal that make up organ pipes, was not oblivious to how Bach recorded his compositions with paper and ink. But it is the music, as we have it, that Williams finds most interesting about Bach and the most important source for knowing what we can about him. Hence, while constantly asking why Bach wrote or did what he did, Williams is quicker than most to remind us of what we cannot know, including the impossibility of reconstructing most of the compositional history of Bach’s music.

How this book grew could be traced by comparing corresponding passages in its variant versions, just as musicologists have traced the growth of many of Bach’s compositions. For instance, “Major organ works,” which now occupies six pages in the middle of chapter 6 (“Leipzig, the middle years: other activities”), incorporates sentences from the first *Life of Bach*. But the preceding section on the harpsichord concertos, like the following one on part 3 of the *Clavierübung* (hereafter “CU3”), is new. So are many further interpolations, which often comprise “notes” on particular compositions. For this reason alone, even those who already own one or both “earlier versions” will wish to obtain this one too.

Those who know Williams’s previous writings will recognize favorite themes, such as the composer’s joy in “playing with motifs” (p. 140), doubts about Bach’s having possessed unusual proficiency as an “organ expert” (pp. 528ff.), and his early adoption of 2/4 time (new around 1700) for a certain type of moderately quick movement with two emphatic beats in each measure. Williams’s style will likewise be familiar to readers of his earlier publications.

Characterized, like Latin poetry, by an almost ostentatious economy of diction, it forces quick readers to slow down, frequently to backtrack. It raises questions through the calculated use of provocative phrases (as when referring to Sebastian as his mother's "last-known" child, p. 13). A serious reader is forced to stop and look something up in a score after reading a reference to "the viola part in the opening movement of the St. John Passion" (p. 142; there are only thirty actual music examples, the same ones as in the second book). This too will be "a book to get to know over a long time," as Andrew McCrea wrote of version 2 in 2008 (*Journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies*, vol. 32).

Unlike more popular books on the subject, Williams's reveals the author's critical reading of the ever-burgeoning literature on Bach. Scholarly publications right up to 2016 clearly were read but are rarely cited; reference is more often to primary sources, chiefly those edited in *Bach-Dokumente* (the standard modern edition of Bach documents) or reported in articles within the *Bach-Jahrbuch*. Those in the know will nevertheless recognize the objects of the occasional sharp crack against other writers: Christoph Wolff, in skeptical remarks about Eisenach as an "important cultural crossroads" (p. 11) and relatively late dates assigned to certain concertos (p. 187); Robert Marshall in a stab at "Freudians" (p. 18, on Bach's childhood); Eric Chafe in the comment that "key-plans and symmetries heard in the Passions have been proposed more enthusiastically than persuasively" (p. 312). Quotation marks often set off ideas with which Williams disagrees, as in the notion "that a certain little canon 'reflects a metaphysical dimension to [Bach's] musical thought'" (p. 626; Google could find the quoted phrase only within the present book).

The curmudgeonly irascibility would be gratuitous did it not serve as warning against what Williams called "assertorial musicology"—his preference being for a scholarship of raising inconvenient questions. His skepticism is not applied only to recent musicology. Every document is questioned like a witness undergoing cross-examination. He asks, for example, whether Bach really sought permission (as required by contract) for all his many trips away from Leipzig (p. 256)—knowing that both organists and university faculty today frequently flout such stipulations. He is deeply suspicious of his principal text, the Obituary, whose authors he supposes to have had "an agenda" (p. 37) in depicting Bach as primarily a German organist and not, for instance, an admirer or imitator of Italian opera and cantata.

Occasionally his reflexive skepticism leads Williams to raise questions, e.g., about the attribution of Cantata 4, which seem unnecessary. There is no reason to suspect that Bach had younger siblings whose existence was never recorded, and his authorship of BWV 4 is as well established as for any other early work that does not survive in an autograph manuscript. But Williams's criticisms of other Bach scholars are not mere sniping. Lamenting the loss of more than half of Bach's so-called secular cantatas, he points out that the composer probably "saw them as musically equal to the church cantatas. . . . If their sources had been preserved as systematically as those of the church cantatas were, or if the church cantatas had survived less well than they did, common perceptions of the Bach oeuvre ever since might have been very different" (p. 331). In other words, the Bach of conventional scholarship may be based too unimaginatively on those sources that happen to survive.

Although Williams avoids speculating about the compositional history of most of Bach's works,

he freely admits that, “As there are limits to how far such evidence [from primary sources] can be taken . . . Bach’s admirers have long had scope for all kinds of speculation, and this book cannot be free of it” (p. 610). He then lists some subjects of speculation that might be profitable: oddities in the Obituary such as its focus on the early life, job searches, and money; “Bach’s memory” (something an aging biographer might nervously contemplate); influences (especially Frescobaldi). For nearly every sentence quoted from the Obituary, Williams raises questions that are intriguing but, given the paucity of evidence, may never be settled. Thus “The three fulsome sentences about Cöthen [where Bach supposedly spent his happiest time working for a congenial prince] . . . suggest several things: that Bach spoke often of the prince and of their relationship; that he had found nothing comparable in Leipzig; and that someone so highly regarded as himself at a prince’s court cannot have been to blame for any vexations in Leipzig” (p. 250). These might all be reasonable inferences, but none is less speculative or psychological than the ruminations of “Freudians.”

As the preceding quotations suggest, Williams liked lists. He imagines Bach himself “ticking off a list” as he introduces different compositional devices into the Goldberg Variations (p. 402). Discussing compositions, Williams enumerates points that may escape careless listeners, such as instances in his vocal music in which Bach uses bare octaves rather than dense harmony to make a point (p. 470). Other lists help not merely to organize but to inspire thoughts, juxtaposing data in ways that allow an inquisitive mind to see patterns or relationships between them: occasions on which Bach examined or dedicated an organ (p. 374); “a catalogue of what can be done with trios” (p. 327); a chronology of events leading to Bach’s appointment at Leipzig (pp. 251–3). Each such list leads to further observations and questions. This last list, which must have resonated with Williams’s personal history as an applicant for teaching jobs on both sides of the Atlantic, provokes commentary about the “geographical spread” of the candidates for the Leipzig position as well as oddities in the sequence of events, such as why Bach was not among those initially invited to apply.

Those who knew Williams would not have thought him a feminist, and some may be surprised by his sympathetic contextualization of Anna Magdalena Bach, the composer’s second wife: “Even with mortality as it was in the early eighteenth century, Anna Magdalena’s fate—to have thirteen children before she was forty-one . . . and by her early thirties to have seen seven of them die over as many years—was hardly to be considered average” (p. 229). Yet he seems to overlook the paternalistic aspect of the marriage of a powerful court Capellmeister to a talented woman barely half his age, subsequently forced to abandon her career as a professional musician. He accepts the traditional view of Anna Magdalena’s two keyboard books as “tokens not only of Bach’s devotion to his young wife but as support for her musical advancement” (p. 231), even though their contents (especially those of the second book) look more like music that he expected her to use to train the children, including her stepson Emanuel.

As up-to-date as Williams’s reading clearly was, he does not take up certain aspects of a picture of Bach that have been coming into focus in recent scholarship. Among these are hints that the anonymous texts of some of the Leipzig cantatas were the work of local university students, and suggestions that during his last two decades Bach avoided performing his own sacred compositions, instead borrowing simpler music by contemporaries. Williams only hints cautiously at “a less rigorously kept programme [i.e., of regular cantata composition] as time

went by” (p. 296). He notes the composer’s awareness of instrumental music by Telemann and Albinoni, but Vivaldi remains the predominant source of inspiration in this sphere (not only for Bach but for Telemann, p. 194).

These are not the only issues on which Williams retains traditional views, if with reservations. He doubts that Bach employed “one-on-a-part” voices during the Leipzig years, asserting that “parts for voices and strings would have been duplicated” (p. 353). On this point he dismisses the arguments of Joshua Rifkin and Andrew Parrott without naming them, while citing easily refuted counter-arguments (pp. 489–92)—although he does allow Bach’s use of smaller forces at Weimar. He ignores Ruth Tatlow’s demonstration that Bach planned major works to comprise certain round numbers of measures, or to fall into segments whose measure-counts form simple proportions to one another. Tatlow’s discovery is no mere matter of numerical “symbols and allusions,” in which Williams admits little interest. He nevertheless points out Bach’s use of “ten melodic phrases from the Ten Commandments chorale” in Cantata 77 (p. 564), the twenty-seven movements in both CU3 and the B-Minor Mass (p. 444), and the many “thirty-twos” in the Goldberg set, published just after Wilhelm Friedemann’s thirty-second birthday (p. 407). Tatlow’s numerical resonances are more significant than any of these, and even if a few are merely coincidental, they reveal something about Bach the composer that is no less profound than the systematic variety which Williams perceives in Bach’s planning of these same works. Clearly Bach’s zeal in both cases is an instance of the supererogation—the “actions of a believer beyond what is required for salvation”—which Williams thinks was an important motivation for other inaudible but technically astonishing features of many of Bach’s compositions (p. 613).

Williams’s special knowledge of practices and personnel in eighteenth-century England frequently leads him to draw comparisons between Bach’s circumstances and what was happening at the same time in Britain. He mentions that Handel’s first English recitative (in *As pants the heart*, 1712) was written at about the same time as Bach’s first up-to-date Italianate vocal writing, in the “Hunt” cantata (p. 162). Maurice Green was apprenticed to and later succeeded the organist at St. Paul’s London, just as Schubart studied with and succeeded Bach at Weimar (p. 169). Yet as much as Williams clearly admires Handel, the latter tends to come up short when Williams compares the two.

On Bach’s music, Williams avoids the detailed type of analysis found especially in his book on the organ works. His profound familiarity with Bach’s entire output is nevertheless evident in innumerable telling observations, even in his unwillingness to construct a chronology for either individual pieces or Bach’s compositional development as a whole. Rather, “each genre largely has its own path of development,” and therefore “it is difficult to specify what in a violin concerto shows it to be ‘maturer’ or ‘later’ than a solo violin sonata or any other kind of music, when each and every one has its own idiom and style. . . . Dating so much of this music at any of its various stages is not only still problematic but also . . . even misleading” (p. 187).

The chronology of a composer’s development might have been a central concern of a “musical biography.” Williams, concluding that a reliable chronology cannot be reconstructed for Bach’s works, instead repeatedly argues a crucial point of musical aesthetics, that expression in music is independent of words or any semantic meaning. Thus Bach’s refashioning of a melody for a love duet as the “Et in unum” of the B-Minor Mass illustrates “music’s refusal to be tied to a single

idea” (p. 635). This principle is important enough to be the book’s final subject, treated in the concluding pages of the epilog. Hardly one to discount the central place of religious belief in Bach’s life, Williams nevertheless points repeatedly to the sheer sensuality of Bach’s music and the error of seeking religious or text-based explanations for the composer’s musical inventions (pp. 40, 165–6, 362).

I found few outright errors, most of them probably slips of the pen. Williams describes the title *Invention* as possibly unique (p. 195), but Grove lists earlier examples, including Bonporti’s, which Bach knew. Bach’s title *Sei Solo* for the six violin sonatas and partitas is not “ungrammatical” (p. 198); this was a normal German plural (cf. C. P. E. Bach’s *Zwey Trio* of 1751). Christian Bach (the composer’s youngest son) may have owned but was certainly not the copyist of an extant manuscript—in fact an autograph—of the B-minor prelude and fugue (BWV 544, p. 586). Certain early works (BWV 992, 820, 989) are preserved with added ornaments in manuscripts owned by Sebastian’s older brother Christoph, who was probably responsible for those ornaments—making it misleading to discuss the latter as if they are the work of Sebastian’s pupils (p. 591). The sonata by C. P. E. Bach to which Sebastian himself (maybe) added ornaments is W. 65/1, not 6/1 (p. 592). In the famously dissonant chorale setting “Es ist genug,” a reference to a “startling alto f sharp” must be an error for “tenor f natural” (ex. 24, p. 471). The name “von Ziegel” must refer to the poet Marianne von Ziegler (p. 263).

More often, problems arise from arguable judgments, or, perhaps, efforts to be provocative. Williams relates the B-minor violin partita, with its doubles, to Froberger (p. 204), but Bach is more likely to have known suite movements with variations from Niedt’s *Handleitung zur Variation* (Hamburg, 1706). I don’t know why Williams refers to the motet *Ich lasse dich nicht* as “Cantata Anh. III 159” (p. 581), but his suggestion that the manuscript, begun by Bach and continued by a pupil, represented a composition exercise is implausible, given signs of botched copying by the student. On the same page, the attribution to Marcello of an early form of the fugue in BWV 914 is unlikely.

Williams assuredly knew that marriage was not a sacrament for the Lutheran Bach, even if his grander wedding cantatas “articulated in their way the idea of marriage as one of the sacraments” (p. 270). Throughout the book, Williams refers to a “Kingdom of Saxony,” which did not exist until 1806; during Bach’s day it was an electoral dukedom, even if its ruler was also King of Poland. Williams knew that (p. 648); perhaps he meant to mock the pretensions of the elector, whom Carlyle called “August the Physically Strong.” It may be “a possibility” that Bach’s Magnificat was revised “for presentation to the Elector of Saxony in 1733” (p. 281, argued further on p. 354), but Catholic settings, including those of Zelenka (like Bach a Saxon court composer) are shorter and in fewer movements, even if Bach’s is somewhat more concise than his other vocal works and moving “towards a sound-world rather removed from the cantatas” (a perceptive observation nevertheless). I cannot imagine the very serious Cantatas 48 and 114, both opening with harsh choruses in G minor, as calculated “to charm visitors” to the Michaelmas Fair as suggested on p. 282, although the idea that Bach might have done so in certain other works (BWV 95, 96, or 149, source of the “Osanna” in the B-Minor Mass) is attractive. The metrically complicated aria “Nur ein Wink” from Part 6 of the Christmas Oratorio is surely not a polonaise (p. 359), even if it has something in common with more distinctly polonaise-like movements in BWV 210 and especially 184. Bach’s alternative use of treble and

soprano clefs in, e.g., the Canonic Variations might have been not “for instruction” (p. 518) but rather to suit different readers, as was true later with Emanuel Bach—the readers in this case being Sebastian himself (in the autograph) and the public (in the first printed edition).

Williams (like Sebastian?) had more affection for Wilhelm Friedemann than Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, but the “M. Bach of Leipzig” who subscribed to Telemann’s Paris Quartets (1738) is unlikely to have been Emanuel (as suggested on p. 397), as he was then living in Frankfurt (Oder). The piece by C. P. E. Bach that Williams calls “La caprice,” H. 113, is actually ‘La capricieuse’ (W. 117/33), and although indeed opening with the same five notes as both a recitative and a toccata movement by his father in the same key, certainly lacks what the latter both may possess, “gesture one might associate with an Old Testament prophet” (p. 285). Couperin wrote two pieces “dans le goût Burlesque” but nothing actually entitled a *burlesca*, as was originally the minuet of the Third Harpsichord Partita (p. 320). On the harpsichord concertos, Williams expresses skepticism about the latter having been assembled “as a *set of six*” (p. 366, italics original), but in fact “the autograph score of the whole set BWV 1052–9” (p. 366) is a composite manuscript, the first six concertos constituting a distinct unit. Whether one agrees with Williams that these are “the most developed and significant keyboard concertos before Mozart’s” (p. 371) must depend on how well one knows all fifty-two of Emanuel Bach’s.

The publisher might have helped out author and readers on some points. It is annoying that articles in the *Bach-Jahrbuch* are cited by year and page alone, making it difficult to identify author and title unless one has a shelfful of that publication from which to pull volumes as needed (the reference on p. 338 to an article about the Leipzig Collegium Musicum is erroneous; it appears in the 2012 volume). To identify the “monographs” about various organs published during Bach’s lifetime, one needs James Wallmann’s 2011 checklist in the *Organ Yearbook* (which Williams edited). Occasionally Williams fails to cite the source of intriguing information. A possible performance of Cantata 172 at Leipzig while Kuhnau was still alive, mentioned on p. 253, reflects the discovery of a printed libretto for Pentecost 1721 (reported by Tatjana Schabalina in *Bach-Jahrbuch* 2008, pp. 57–58). But I don’t know on what basis Williams describes Telemann as composer of “four out of ten” annual cycles of cantatas performed by Emanuel Bach at Hamburg (p. 267). Nor can I identify the manuscripts Williams has in mind in a reference to “Emanuel’s own copies of the Prelude and Fugue in B flat and the Preludes in B major and B minor” (p. 411).

A thousand such points would not reduce the usefulness of this volume for stimulating an alert reader to think more creatively about Bach and his music. Yet as I finished my first reading of the book, I was uncertain whether all Williams’s questions, lists, and observations about the music support or hinder the creation of a biography. One expects a life-and-works of a composer to explain not just how the subject lived or what he or she wrote, but what made possible his or her accomplishment, how it came to be. Answering this question requires going beyond an enumeration of elements of a style or stages in its development. It is not an easy question to answer, for it involves asking where genius comes from, a question that may seem impertinent even to consider. Intellectual humility or deference to the subject could lead an author to avoid it. Williams does, at least implicitly, relate training, family life, living conditions, the society and the environment in which the artist worked, to Bach’s compositions. Yet, by designing his book as a commentary, even if an unconventionally immense one, Williams limited the extent to

which he could address the fundamental problem of “musical biography.”

Williams surely understood that although this book would be his last word about Bach, it could hardly be *the* last word. Even the final pages of the epilogue are more provocative than conclusive. Do Bach’s scores really “have far fewer ambiguous notes than those of other composers such as Scarlatti”? The many places where Bach equivocated (as with the accidentals in the A-minor prelude from book 2 of the “48”) suggest that for him as well as lesser composers, “several readings of a crux are in many cases equally plausible” (p. 621). Are Bach’s distinctive fugue subjects really “typical of the traditional German organist’s search in general for novel themes and procedures, free from the conformist French and Italian conventions”? Many Italian fugue subjects are formulaic, but Bach uses those same formulas when writing in the *stile antico*. On the other hand, Legrenzi and Zelenka (neither organists nor German) could write fugue subjects almost as striking as Bach’s. Although publications for keyboard are predominant among Bach’s late contrapuntal works, if one added up all the compositionally intricate movements in the vocal music, from the F-major Kyrie to the Confiteor of the B-Minor Mass, would they seem any less “educative” or “advanced” than the keyboard music, or the latter any less imbued with “‘emotional power’ and ‘spiritual profundity’” (p. 618)?

The quotation marks around those phrases belie Williams’s discomfort with the search for expression or meaning in Bach’s vocal music. A reader who is a keyboard player might be tempted to share Williams’s belief that composing for keyboard “enabled him to think purely musically” (p. 620). Yet there is no reason to suppose that keyboard pieces lack or lacked “social purpose” or that vocal compositions could not be equally “musical.” If Williams really believed this, it points to a refusal to engage with musicological thought of the past few decades. That does not mean he is wrong, even if he is merely restating in an idiosyncratic way the old view of Bach as peculiarly concerned with certain technical aspects of composition. Whether that is true, and whether keyboard music really should be viewed as the central part of Bach’s oeuvre, as it was for the writers of the Obituary, are issues with which future biographers, and thoughtful players, must continue to grapple.