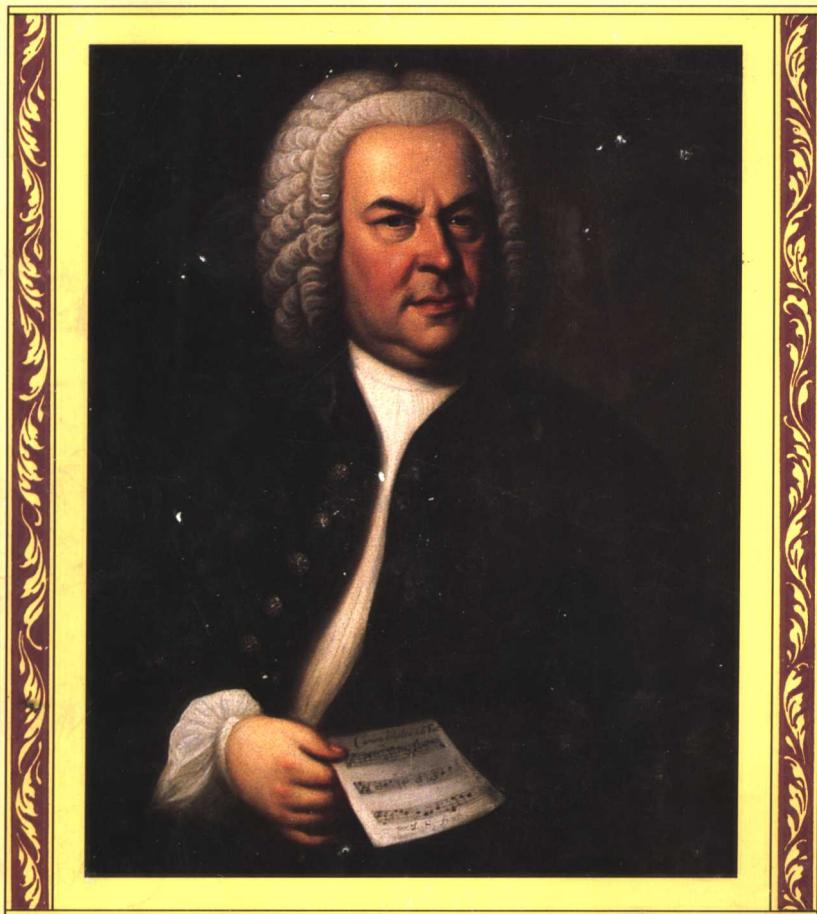


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# BACH



*Essays on His Life and Music*

CHRISTOPH WOLFF

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# BACH

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ESSAYS ON  
HIS LIFE  
AND  
MUSIC  
◆

Christoph Wolff

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## Preface

THIS VOLUME may well be understood as a book about a book the author doesn't feel quite ready to write. Writing knowledgeably and responsibly on virtually any aspect of Bach and his music is one of the more arduous and perplexing tasks in the business of musical scholarship. It actually proves even more difficult and challenging for someone who has devoted a good part of his professional activities to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. So I readily admit my apprehension about undertaking a comprehensive life and works. On the other hand, since there hardly exists a more fascinating and rewarding subject in the history of art than the music of Bach, I became intensely involved in Bach scholarship and have made some headway. While the following pages certainly don't match a monographic account, they nevertheless offer a wide range of fundamental materials and interpretive thoughts toward such an endeavor. This book, then, reflects the humbling task of uncovering the manifold layers and dimensions one must consider if one wants to come close to understanding one of the most powerful artistic minds and creative geniuses of all times and all peoples. This seemingly exaggerated phrase ("of all times and all peoples") can actually be traced back to the later eighteenth century, as the penultimate chapter will show. Holding Bach in awe began early, at least in professional circles; even musicians as unsuspiciously self-confident as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven took this attitude.

In these collected essays I try to bring into focus the image of a uniquely gifted, ambitious, self-critical and self-challenging musician whose genius combined outstanding performance virtuosity with supreme creative prowess; whose compositions offer a most remarkable absorption and synthesis of traditional and contemporary technical and stylistic features, and demonstrate a perfect balance of forceful inventiveness and intellectual control—qualities that established new aesthetic standards for later generations. These many and diverse aspects—whether they relate to Bach the human being, to the composer's workshop, to the realizations of his musical ideas, or to his

place in history—have always been of great interest to me and, therefore, thoroughly pervade these Bach studies. The chapters in this volume were selected from some five dozen Bach essays written over a twenty-five-year period, between 1963 and 1988, and addressing quite different audiences. The material covers a wide spectrum of topics and inquiries which, I hope, will spark the reader's awareness of the sweeping complexity, richness, and excitement of Bach scholarship and, in the last analysis, of Bach's music and creative genius itself.

The chapters have been organized to give the multifaceted character of the collection a clearer definition, yet the five section headings merely suggest the scope and emphasis within each group of essays. Neither issues of biography, context, and reception history on the one hand nor aspects of source studies, chronology, and style on the other can be reasonably confined to any single section. The discussion of new sources, for instance, is not limited to the second group of essays but figures rather prominently in Chapters 8, 16, 18, and 22 as well. Moreover, biographical details turn up fairly constantly throughout, as do discussions of sources—be they musical, literary, or archival—or considerations of compositional procedures, style, and aesthetic principles. To those familiar with my work, the virtual omnipresence of philology, analysis, criticism, and interpretation in however varying applications and configurations will not come as a surprise. It is indeed my hope that the reader will be able to detect and follow the “red thread” running through all chapters: traces of a deliberately integrated examination whose aims are to uncover historical evidence of various kinds; to refine our understanding of Bach's creative life (from a biographical standpoint inadequately documented) and of his artistic development, work habits, and compositional intentions; as well as, finally, to illuminate the substance of his musical language and the significance of his oeuvre.

The thirty-two essays in this collection, half of them heretofore not available in English, remain for the most part as originally published. Substantial deletions, major textual modifications, and additions of notes are identified as such. Bringing the individual essays into an agreeably coherent sequence, however, required many silent adjustments here and there. Bibliographic citations, annotation style, and other external details have been standardized, cross-references added. Since the original essays—whether reprinted or translated—have basically not been rewritten or changed with respect to content and substance, it seemed appropriate, in some cases mandatory, to provide postscripts with explanatory notes, comments, important corrections of fact, updated information, and references to recent research.

In collecting these essays I had first to overcome the conviction that I should not divert my energies to past projects at the expense of new endeavors. However, the vigorous and persistent efforts of Professor George J. Buelow of Indiana University prevailed. It was he who originated the idea of collecting my Bach essays and who devised a plot enlisting a close mutual friend, Alfred Mann, Professor Emeritus at the Eastman School of Music, to

translate for this volume the essays written and available only in German. Now that the project has reached its conclusion I feel obliged to express my profound gratitude above all to the two men who initiated it. The translating of the sixteen German essays was a vital, indeed essential, task, and Alfred did a selfless, admirable, and remarkably expeditious job. Our discussions of linguistic details disclosed again and again his intimate knowledge of the material at hand; they also revealed to me his true identity, namely that of a generous and faithful friend. There is another true friend I cannot leave unmentioned: Hans-Joachim Schulze of the Leipzig Bach-Archiv, my tireless and indispensable companion in matters of Bach scholarship. Although he was not involved in this particular book, our collaboration is evident in it nevertheless.

In addition, I am most grateful to Carolyn Mann, Ethel Rider, and Jenny Shallenberger for their kind assistance in the preparation of the manuscript, to Kate Schmit for her careful and competent copy editing, and to Peter Wollny for preparing the index. My special thanks go to Margaretta Fulton, the resourceful Humanities Editor of Harvard University Press, who for some time has wanted a new book from me but who nevertheless gracefully accepted—and helped to shape—a bundle of what I hope is a little more than just “old stuff.”

In all likelihood, this volume would not have come into being had it not happened that my professional career led me from my native country—without having to abandon it—to America. I don't wish to conceal at this point that I am intensely conscious of the fact that numerous German colleagues from an earlier generation—Alfred Mann among them—came to cross the Atlantic under very different, indeed gruesome, auspices. What I count among the most important experiences of my personal and professional life is the privilege of many a close and rewarding encounter with a number of émigré scholars who contributed so much to American intellectual life in general and to musicology in particular. And then there are the many newly gained acquaintances and friends, particularly my colleagues and students from the academic institutions I have been associated with. Their support, encouragement, and expectations as well as many a lively, productive, and sometimes challenging exchange had, without a question, a most profound impact on my searching, thinking, and writing. This if anything is in fact quite well documented by the present volume, whose dedication page only inadequately registers what I perceive as particularly meaningful bonds and a deep sense of affection.

## Abbreviations

- Bach Compendium* Hans-Joachim Schulze and Christoph Wolff, *Bach Compendium. Analytisch-bibliographisches Repertorium der Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs*, vol. I, parts 1–4 (Leipzig, Frankfurt, London, and New York, 1985–1989), vols. II–III (forthcoming)
- Dok I–III* *Bach-Dokumente*, ed. Bach-Archiv Leipzig
- Volume I: *Schriftstücke von der Hand Johann Sebastian Bachs*, ed. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Leipzig and Kassel, 1963)
- Volume II: *Fremdschriftliche und gedruckte Dokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs 1785–1750*, ed. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Leipzig and Kassel, 1969)
- Volume III: *Dokumente zum Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs 1750–1800*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schulze (Leipzig and Kassel, 1972)
- Bach Reader* *The Bach Reader. A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (New York, 1945; rev. edition, 1966)
- BG* *Johann Sebastian Bachs Werke. Gesamtausgabe der Bachgesellschaft* (Leipzig, 1851–1899; rpt., Ann Arbor, 1947)
- BJ* *Bach-Jahrbuch*, ed. Arnold Schering (1904–1939); ed. Max Schneider (1940–1952); ed. Alfred Dürr and Werner Neumann (1953–1974); ed. Hans-Joachim Schulze and Christoph Wolff (1975ff.)
- BWV* Wolfgang Schmieder, *Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs. Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* (Leipzig, 1950; rev. and expanded edition: Wiesbaden, 1990)
- Dadelsen Chr* Georg von Dadelsen, *Beiträge zur Chronologie der Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs*, Tübinger Bach-Studien, vols. 4–5 (Trossingen, 1958)
- DSB* Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin\*
- Dürr Chr, Chr 2* Alfred Dürr, "Zur Chronologie der Leipziger Vokalwerke J. S. Bachs," first published in *BJ* 1957, pp. 5–162; rev. and expanded edition: Kassel, 1976

Forkel	Johann Nicolaus Forkel, <i>Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke</i> (Leipzig, 1802; rpt., Frankfurt, 1950); trans. Augustus C. F. Kollmann [1820], in <i>Bach Reader</i> , pp. 295–356
Kinsky	Georg Kinsky, <i>Die Originalausgaben der Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs</i> (Vienna, Leipzig, and Zurich, 1937; rpt., Hilversum, 1968)
Kobayashi <i>Chr</i>	Yoshitake Kobayashi, "Zur Chronologie der Spätwerke Johann Sebastian Bachs. Kompositions- und Aufführungstätigkeit von 1736 bis 1750," <i>BJ</i> 1988, pp. 7–72; partially translated in Gerhard Herz, "Yoshitake Kobayashi's Article, 'On the Last Phase of Bach's Work—Compositions and Performances: 1736 to 1750.' An Analysis with Translated Portions of the Original Text," <i>Bach. The Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute</i> 21 (1990), pp. 3–25
Marshall <i>Bach</i>	Robert L. Marshall, <i>The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The Sources, the Style, the Significance</i> (New York, 1989)
NBA	Johann Sebastian Bach, <i>Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke</i> ( <i>Neue Bach-Ausgabe</i> ), ed. Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Institut Göttingen and Bach-Archiv Leipzig (Leipzig and Kassel, 1954ff.) [NBA 1/2 = series I, vol. 2; <i>Krit. Bericht</i> = critical commentary]
Spitta I–III	Philipp Spitta, <i>Joh. Seb. Bach</i> , 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1873–1880; rpt., Wiesbaden, 1962); <i>Johann Sebastian Bach: His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685–1750</i> , trans. Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland, 3 vols. (London, 1884; rpt., New York, 1952) [all references are to the English edition unless otherwise indicated]
SPK	Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin*
Wolff <i>Stile antico</i>	Christoph Wolff, <i>Der stile antico in der Musik Johann Sebastian Bachs. Studien zu Bachs Spätwerk</i> , Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft, vol. 6 (Wiesbaden, 1968)

\*Bach manuscripts originally belonging to the former Preußische Staatsbibliothek Berlin are now divided between DSB and SPK (formerly East and West Berlin, respectively) and carry the designations Mus. ms. Bach P and Mus. ms. Bach St. For practical reasons and following established custom in the scholarly Bach literature, these Berlin call numbers are now and then reduced to P (P[artitur] = score) and St (St[immen] = parts).



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OUTLINES OF A  
MUSICAL PORTRAIT



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## New Perspectives on Bach Biography

THE TRACING of the manifold subtle and often complex interconnection of life and works has always been, and continues to be, the central concern of biography. In the case of a painter, poet, or musician the primary interest focuses, without a doubt, on the works and their aesthetic presence, but a deeper understanding of works of art presupposes also a special awareness of their historical context. Among the particularly relevant aspects we find a whole spectrum of biography-related issues, from the genesis of a work and its artistic conception to its social and aesthetic function, regardless of whether we are dealing with a single work of art or a whole repertory of creative output.

Biographical perspectives are supposed to provide a credible framework for the integration of the creative output in the story of an artist's life and to aim at an interpretation of the complicated and many-layered interrelationship. This should ultimately let us perceive even a single work as a part of a greater whole. But the ideal case of a complete, coherent, and logical presentation of a "life and works" story without gaps can hardly be realized. Biography is bound to be fragmentary. One need only consider how difficult it is to reconstruct faithfully the events of the past if one were to attempt one's own autobiography. All the more intricate is the researching of the often blurred, if not lost, traces of a historical figure. The unavoidable merging of objective facts and subjective interpretation poses additional problems. As far as the matter of objectivity and subjectivity is concerned, artist biography faces very serious questions resulting from the juxtaposition of, on the one hand, the artist's life as a historically self-contained phenomenon and, on the other hand, the continuing presence of a historically fraught but living oeuvre. This dilemma nevertheless implies the chance of putting the works themselves in the very center of the discussion. There lies, after all, our primary interest.

Biography, as a special branch of historiography, is obliged to shed light not only on external circumstances and events but—especially in the case of

an artist—on inner, immaterial, intellectual, and creative developments. Data of all kinds need to be compiled, ordered, analyzed, evaluated, and, finally, synthesized toward a truthful and vivid portrait.

# I

We are in the very fortunate position of possessing—in the case of Bach—a biographical masterpiece of the first rank. This is Philipp Spitta's magisterial two-volume monograph, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (Leipzig, 1873–80; English edition: London, 1884). It became almost immediately the standard work of Bach scholarship and ideally complemented the complete critical edition of the Bach-Gesellschaft then still in progress. Going well beyond the scope of Otto Jahn's *W. A. Mozart* (Leipzig, 1856–59) and Friedrich Chrysander's *Georg Friedrich Händel* (Leipzig, 1858–67), Spitta conceived his book in the then still young but already significant German tradition of critical-historical biography, which combined extensive source studies with large-scale inquiries into the historical background and general cultural, specifically humanistic ("geistesgeschichtlichen"), context. In so doing, he followed, both in scholarly ambition and methodological goals, biographical standard works which have remained significant models until today, such as Johann Gustav Droysen's *Leben des Grafen York* (Göttingen, 1851–52) or Hermann Grimm's *Leben Michel-Angelos* (Hannover, 1860–63), the prototypes of an entirely new kind of biography.

The enormous weight of Spitta's compilation, analysis, and synthesis of material concerning Bach pushed aside the older Bach biographies of Johann Nicolaus Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bach's Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig, 1802; English edition: London, 1820); Carl Ludwig Hilgenfeldt, *Johann Sebastian Bach's Leben, Wirken und Werke: ein Beitrag zur Kunstgeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1850); and Carl Hermann Bitter, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (Berlin, 1865; 2nd edition, 1880). Spitta's work surpassed its predecessors to such an extent that they became less and less attractive as sources to rely on, to cite, and to refer to. But Spitta's broader historical perspectives and particularly his enormous ability to synthesize, formulate, and shape a Bach picture implied at the same time the danger of an all too well-rounded, logical, definitive biographical statement. Indeed, as a result, a critical continuation of Spitta's work did not really take place. Without an exception, the later biographies of Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach, le musicien-poète* (Leipzig, 1905; English edition: London, 1911); Charles Sanford Terry's *Bach: A Biography* (London 1928; here for the first time with some new biographical documents); Rudolf Steglich's *J. S. Bach* (Potsdam, 1935)—as well as Karl Geiringer's *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Culmination of an Era* (New York, 1966) and Malcolm Boyd's *Bach* (London, 1983), both incorporating results of more recent Bach research—are still based on Spitta's premises and methodology, and hence correct or change only minor details of his overall picture. Without a doubt they, legitimately and in their own right, stress aspects of Bach and his music which were disregarded or underemphasized

by Spitta, but on the whole they all follow rather closely Spitta's model and method.

In recent years we have observed a new, general interest in biographical writings of artists, poets, political figures, and so on. Also developing is a clear trend toward biography which considers sociological and, particularly, psychological elements much more seriously and competently. This often results in a necessary de-idealization of historical figures as typified by nineteenth-century biography, especially by those classic examples of "heroic" biography.

A case in point is Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Mozart* (Frankfurt am Main, 1977; English edition: London, 1979) or Maynard Solomon's *Beethoven* (New York, 1977). Beethoven and Mozart, of course, as well as Wagner, Mahler, and many others, represent much better objects for psychobiography than Bach. For example, the wealth of letters from the Mozart family, with their multi-faceted insights into daily life, presents a sharp contrast to the rather narrow and dry nature of the surviving Bach correspondence. Only very rarely do we get a glimpse of truly human elements, such as Anna Magdalena Bach asking her husband in a letter of June 1740 to bring back a singing bird from a trip to Berlin.<sup>1</sup> Letters of the late 1730s showing Johann Sebastian's concern for his son Johann Gottfried Bernhard are similarly touching documents of familial tenderness.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the Bach correspondence, together with further autograph, apograph, and printed documents, is a largely untapped source of information. The source materials compiled by the Leipzig Bach Archive in three volumes of *Bach-Dokumente* practically double the source repertory known to Spitta. But the results of Bach research in the area of musical source studies, with some rather drastic changes in the chronology of the works, with new insights into the genesis and performance history of individual works, or groups of works, call for substantial biographical revisions. In addition, our knowledge concerning the transmission of sources after 1750 sheds new light on the understanding and traditions of Bach's music in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the aspect of reception history ("Rezeptionsgeschichte"). If biography should make sense, we must take this latter aspect more seriously and, therefore, reconsider also the contributions made by the early biographers Forkel, Hilgenfeldt, and Bitter.

This does not mean, however, that we should call for a new standard biography to replace Spitta. It seems much more important and prudent—quite apart from the questionable value of so-called definitive standard works—to investigate on a smaller scale some crucial biographical questions, to examine limited areas more systematically and by using better methods, and to aim for a critical synthesis. In the case of Bach we shall always discover blind spots or find ourselves ending up on dead-end roads. This does not only happen in areas such as local history (for instance, what do we really know about musical life in Weimar, Cöthen, or Leipzig?) or the repertories of Bach's contemporaries (for example, what do we actually know

about the vocal works of Kuhnau, Fasch, or Stölzel; we don't even possess an edition of Hasse's opera, *Cleofide*, which Bach is known to have heard in 1731). Furthermore, there are numerous problems in the documentation of Bach's life between 1700 and 1714, which make it extremely difficult to discuss the composer's formative years.

One can safely say that a documentary biography of Bach, along the lines of Otto Erich Deutsch's *Schubert* (London, 1944) is an impossibility. In the case of Bach, only biography which focuses on the many-layered unfolding of his creative work seems to be a realistic as well as desirable project. It is by no means just a coincidence that it was not primarily the discovery of new archival documents, but rather the re-evaluation of the musical sources themselves that made biographical revisions necessary.

## II

Among the crucial points of any biographical representation is the question of periodization; that is, the organization of life and works into logical narrative units and chronological periods. When the understanding of personality and creative output is sought, decisions regarding this organization become extremely relevant. Pragmatic aspects generally prevail in the disposition of the monographic biographical account. In this respect Spitta's universally accepted five-part periodization of Bach's life appears to be a case in point and to have had its repercussions until very recent times.

His first main chapter deals with Bach's youth and education, 1685–1707. The Mühlhausen-Weimar decade 1708–1717 is described as the first period of mastership and is followed by a chapter on Cöthen, 1717–1723. The two main chapters of the second volume are exclusively concerned with the Leipzig years, which are divided into two periods: 1723–1734 and 1735–1750. Spitta's concept and goal is obvious: he portrays Bach's life in terms of the evolution of a composer who developed his mastership rather slowly through the stages of organist, capellmeister, and cantor; its culmination is—*cum grano salis*—the Protestant “arch-cantor,” that is, the creator of the chorale cantata representing the ideal genre of true Lutheran church music. We quickly recognize the functional aim of Spitta's periodization as well as the stability of its ideological fundament. However, in testing the strength of the underlying documentary base we discover the problems to their full extent.

One of the legitimate premises for Spitta's discussion of Bach's music was the assumption that, according to the circumstances of Bach's time, the positions of the composer determined his output in almost every respect; personal decisions were clearly of secondary value. And indeed, we can observe the act of balancing between the artist and the employee at a number of occasions in Bach's life. But on the whole, he surprisingly behaved a lot more like a free and emancipated person than our basically nineteenth-century image of Bach would permit us to believe. The tenor of Spitta's biography cannot, *a priori*, be considered mistaken, but it can only result in a vicious



circle when a chronology of Bach's artistic achievement is pressed into a logical, developmental biographical structure, each supporting the other. Thus, for instance, the famous organ *Passacaglia* in C Minor could only have been a late Weimar masterpiece, just as the Cöthen period had to culminate in the Brandenburg Concertos.

New chronological findings, which are by no means restricted to the Leipzig cantatas, challenge Spitta's periodization without, however, suggesting a similarly strong alternative. The borderlines of the emerging biographical phases are definitely more blurred than Spitta and traditional Bach biography suggested. Thus, for instance, the years up to 1707 have to be seen in a much more differentiated way—the early works of Bach are not only more numerous than we previously thought, but also quite a bit weightier. We must, furthermore, recognize that Bach's appointment as concertmaster in Weimar in 1714 marks a significant turning point with decisive consequences regarding his creative activities. As yet another example, the new chronology of the Leipzig vocal works allows the first years after 1723 to appear as a relatively closed and coherent unit (primarily dedicated to cantata production) while the following decade (ca. 1728/29 to 1738/39) shows Bach's preoccupation with his Collegium Musicum; this necessarily results in a rather clear-cut division of the Leipzig years into three periods: approximately 1723 to 1728/29; 1729 to 1738/39; and 1739 to 1750. However, biography would benefit from not fixing those time spans as really separate units because any such schematism implies the danger of a falsified picture. This can easily be exemplified on the basis of the two periods which are so readily defined as more or less self-contained chapters: the Cöthen years, 1717–1723, and the early Leipzig years, 1723–1729.

There is, first of all, the question of the change from courtly to municipal and church office. In Bach's letter to his friend Georg Erdmann of October 1730, he referred to this change, in retrospect, as a change for the worse—a step downward on the social ladder. The letter indicates as the principal motivation for the change: first, the declining musical interest of Prince Leopold since his marriage with the “*amusa*” princess of Bernburg; second, better chances for the education of his adolescent sons in Leipzig. There were, of course, no reasons for Bach to provide detailed explanations concerning his move from Cöthen to Leipzig, because they could not have been of any interest to Erdmann. Therefore, alone, we should not overestimate the informative value of the Erdmann letter. But why indeed did Bach leave Cöthen, where he (as he also put it in the letter of 1730) thought to stay until the end of his life? The story of the unmusical princess appears, under close scrutiny, as somewhat doubtful. Already well before Leopold's marriage, Bach had tried to get away from Cöthen, as his application for the position of organist at St. Jacobi in Hamburg of 1720 demonstrates. His dedication of the score of the so-called Brandenburg Concertos of spring 1721 to the margrave of Brandenburg may similarly signify his interest in a change of position. A principal reason for Bach's desire to get away from Cöthen in 1720–21 seems