

Bach's Musical Universe
The Composer and His Work
Christoph Wolff

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The name of Christoph Wolff is synonymous with the study of Bach's life and substantial folio of compositions that has included research into the origins, purpose, and the music's reception. This has stimulated, challenged, and informed both the performer and reader, and since German unification his energy and entrepreneurial drive has enabled many of the projects at the Leipzig Bach Archiv, the nerve-centre of world Bach Research of which he was Director (2001-2014). Prof. Wolff remains a Board Trustee and in addition to completing more literary work, he has overseen the beautifully refurbished Bach Museum that is in the same building as the Archiv. Wolff was also instrumental in ensuring the significant Singakademie Library, which was discovered in Kiev at the turn of the century, was brought back to Berlin complete with its 5000 items including the Alt-Bachisches Archiv (a rich collection of 17th century compositions by Bach Family members). It has been a fulfilling and very productive life, with many of the succeeding generation of Bach Scholars and Researchers his former students. These are now carrying forward what he has established. Part of the author's literary legacy this century are the Bach biographical and music surveys.

We already have Wolff's prize-winning *"Johann Sebastian Bach, The Learned Musician"*, published in 2000 for the Bach 250th, a wide-ranging survey of the composer's life, domestic, working environment and career-path. The latest volume *"Bach's Musical Universe, The Composer and His Work"*, published in March 2020, is a very welcome and scholarly complement to the earlier biography that focusses more intensely on the music itself, the thought and compositional processes that created it. The writing style is not for the faint-hearted, but as Wolff makes clear in his Preface in which he reveals in some detail his approach to compiling the book, the author chooses to discuss in some depth significant works or collections of works under each designated chapter heading, as opposed to covering the whole folio of works more superficially, an impossible task as well given the sheer size and scale of Bach's output. This provides a useful focus for the reader, leading perhaps to a clearer assessment and description of the composer's Art. For maximum impact, and unlike the earlier volume, the numerically economical number of musical examples, as well as the illustrations, are included alongside or near to the narrative that applies to them, and are not consigned to the back of the book. As we have come to expect from Professor Wolff, the book is meticulously prepared, supported by numerous Tables, footnotes, and extensive Bibliography. Readers will be particularly drawn to the detailed Chronology, clearly set out for easy reference and fascinating reading in itself.

The eight chapters are book-ended by a detailed Prologue entertainingly sub-titled *"The Composer's Business Card"* that sets the tone for the chosen music's assessment that follows. The Epilogue provides much food for thought and reflects overall upon Bach's place and honest approach to his Art in amongst what must have been a 'hot-bed' of intellectuals following his every offering from the comfort of their pews or courtly seat! Random selection of a particular chapter is a considerable temptation given the way these are ordered, but side-stepping Chapter 1 *"Revealing the Narrative of a Musical Universe: The First List of Works from 1750"* for example, means the reader will miss out on essential background information about *'Bach's Universe'* including the size of his Estate, the Manuscripts and, given the author's approach to writing the book, the Benchmark Works. With this volume, the author has set his own 'Benchmark', inspiration for further surveys by present and future Bach scholars, perspectives that will add further substance to Bach Bookshelves to which Christoph Wolff has contributed with great knowledge and commitment. Such volumes help to disseminate to future generations observations and information about Johann Sebastian Bach, this fabulous creator whose music touches both the performer and listener on so many levels.

Margaret Steinitz