

The sound of faith

by [Victoria Barnett](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

*My Only Comfort: Death, Deliverance, and Discipleship in the Music of Bach*, by Calvin R. Stapert

*Johanne Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, by Christoph Wolff

Toward the end of his biography of Johann Sebastian Bach, Christoph Wolff tells a wonderful anecdote about Mozart's first encounter with Bach's music. Thirty-nine years after Bach's death, Mozart visited the St. Thomas School in Leipzig and listened to a performance of one of the motets. After a few measures, "Mozart sat up, startled" and, at the close of the performance, cried out, "This is music one can learn from!"

In this 250th anniversary year of Bach's death, radio listeners and concertgoers have been treated to such an abundance of his music that it may be difficult for them to hear its technical mastery and profound beauty as Mozart did, with his "whole soul . . . in his ears." In different ways, these two books give reflective listeners such new insights into Bach's music that we may discover things we've not heard before.

Little is known about Bach's youth and private life. By describing the world in which Bach grew up and drawing extensively on the records of Bach's professional life, however, Wolff paints a fairly complex portrait of the man and his music. The extended Bach family was so talented that churches in the part of Germany where they lived often simply looked for "a Bach" when they needed a church musician. The music makers at Bach family gatherings included such contemporaries as Pachelbel (who was godfather to Bach's sister Johanna). Johann Sebastian grew up speaking the language of music as fluently as he did German. He also acquired an extensive knowledge of scripture, liturgy and theology.

Even in this remarkable family, Johann Sebastian was unique. Orphaned at age ten, strong-minded and independent, he bypassed the usual musical apprenticeship to become a choral scholar at St. Michael's School in Luneberg. Wolff traces his development as organist, composer, cantor, court musician and teacher, culminating in Bach's 27 years as cantor and music director in Leipzig. Enough anecdotes

emerge to give some insight into Bach's personality. Particularly at the beginning of his career, he had difficulties with discipline among his choir members and students, and didn't suffer fools gladly. He possessed both a clear sense of his own extraordinary talent and a touching eagerness to learn from others, such as Buxtehude and Handel. Richly paid by the standards of the time, he was also ambitious, spending four weeks in jail after angering the leaders of Weimar by insisting on leaving his post there early for a better position in Cothen.

Most of our insight into Bach, however, emerges from his musical life. His mastery extended into all spheres of music. His dexterity at the keyboard and organ was legendary, and he understood the construction of instruments (and was involved in the building of at least 21 organs). This knowledge enabled him to compensate for the shortcomings of instruments through compositional technique. He was incredibly prolific, writing hundreds of choral, keyboard and instrumental works. The new principles of polyphony, instrumentation and technique incorporated into this music altered the future of composition and "musical science."

He accomplished all this while teaching, performing, directing choirs and running the church-music programs of various towns. During the Advent/Christmas season of 1723-24 in Leipzig, for example, he directed 18 performances that included eight newly composed works (one of them, the Magnificat in E-flat major, a major vocal work). Just as Isaac Newton altered the future of philosophy, mathematics and physics, Bach changed our very understanding of music.

The "ultimate cause" of "real music," Bach wrote, "should be none else but the glory of God and the recreation of the soul/mind. Where this is not observed, there is no real music, but only a devilish blare and hubbub." Indeed, one of the things that set Bach's music apart was not just its technical brilliance but its theological depth. Bach understood the liturgical elements of the service and the theology behind them. From the beginning of his career, he viewed his task as composer and cantor as the creation and performance of music for the glory of God. As Bach himself said, "With devotional music, God is always present in his grace."

Thus, Bach's religious works are far more than musical gems adorning religious services. This is the premise of Calvin Stapert's *My Only Comfort*, which explores the theology of Bach's works through a meditative reflection on parts of the Heidelberg catechism. Stapert examines three motifs (death, deliverance and discipleship) in the music and text of several cantatas, several passages of the Mass in B Minor, and

the Christmas Oratorio.

Stapert admits that his is an unusual approach to a musician grounded in Lutheranism. But, as Wolff mentions, the cantatas actually reflect the language and ideas of a pietist strain of Lutheranism, and Bach himself seems to have steered clear of theological disputes. Following the lectionary, Bach composed five annual cantata cycles (around 60 per year; two of the cycles were lost) that functioned as "cantata sermons," offering *explicatio* and *applicatio* of the scriptural text. The use of scriptural and catechetical reflection may actually help us hear these cantatas as they were meant to be heard. Stapert's discussion of several compositions, notably the Mass in B Minor, shows how text, music and theology combine in a theologically and musically profound way.

Written by experts, these books are demanding; some sections of both may be of more interest to musicologists than to lay readers. Yet each reminds us that, at its best, Bach's music is an expression of the divine. For me, the first measures of the Christmas Oratorio--the hushed drums, the swell of trumpets and the burst of song--are simply what Advent and Christmas sound like. These opening measures relate the story of anticipation, promise and the certainty of joy as clearly and profoundly as do the words of the Gospels. With remarkable craft and genius, Bach transposed the essential language of faith into music. Readers of these splendid books will listen to that music with renewed appreciation.